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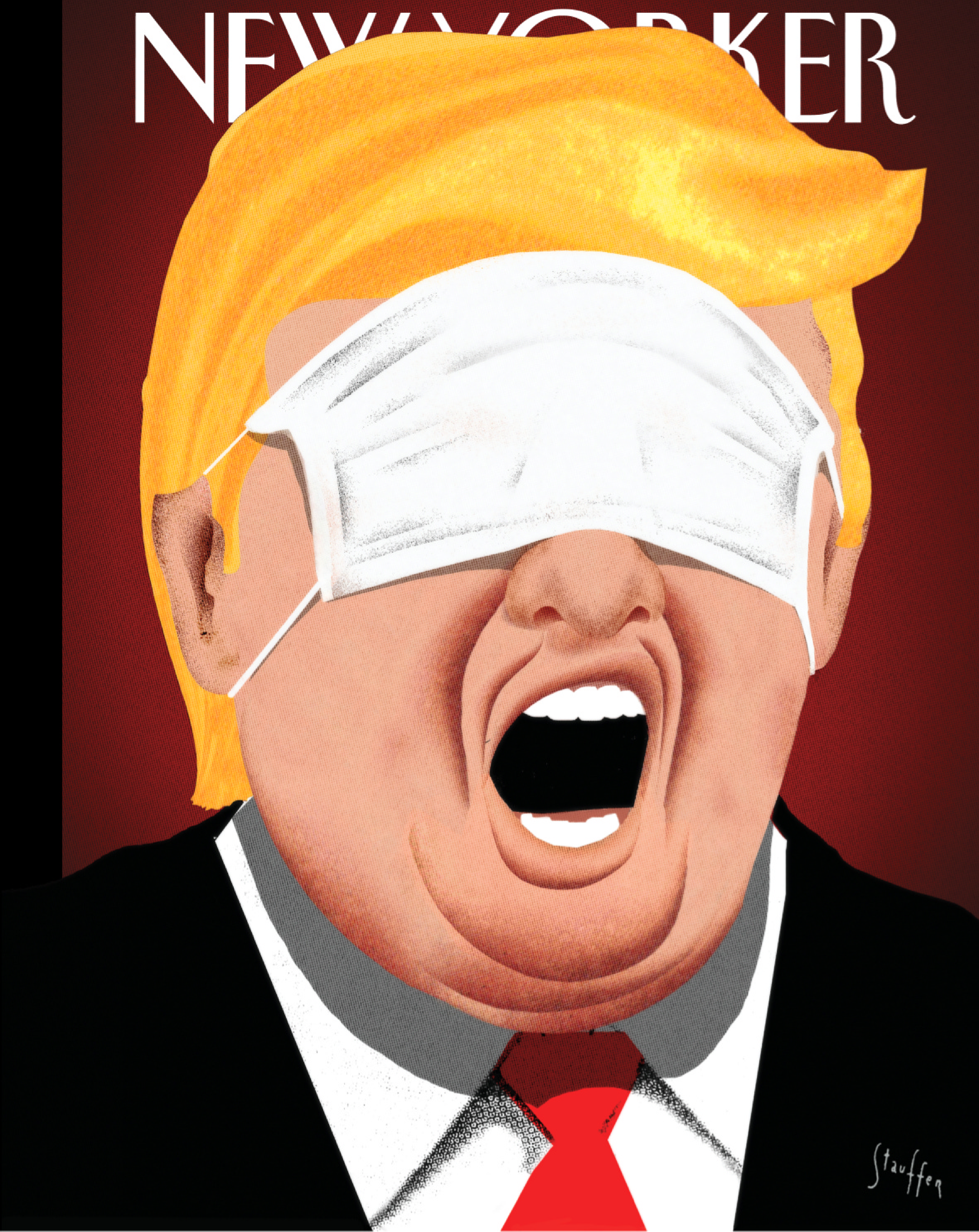

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# CONTRIBUTORS

**Andrew Marantz** (*"#Winning," p. 44*), a staff writer, has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2011. He is the author of "Antisocial: Online Extremists, Techno-Utopians, and the Hijacking of the American Conversation."

**Rivka Galchen** (*"Complete Trash," p. 30*) has published four books. Her latest, the children's novel "Rat Rule 79," came out last year.

**Alex Ross** (*"Exodus," p. 38*), the magazine's music critic since 1996, will publish his third book, "Wagnerism," in September.

**Eileen Myles** (*Poem, p. 48*) is the author of, most recently, the poetry collection "Evolution."

**Idrees Kahloon** (*Books, p. 75*) is the U.S. policy correspondent for *The Economist*.

**Jill Lepore** (*Comment, p. 25*) is a professor of history at Harvard. In September, she will publish her fourteenth book, "If Then: How the Simulmatics Corporation Invented the Future."

**Vinson Cunningham** (*"Test Case," p. 56*), a theatre critic for the magazine, became a staff writer in 2016.

**Anne Enright** (*Fiction, p. 68*) is the author of seven novels. Her latest, "Actress," is out this month.

**Brian Stauffer** (*Cover*), an illustrator and animator who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, has won three medals from the Society of Illustrators and one from the Society of Publication Designers. This is his third cover for the magazine.

**Na Kim** (*Sketchpad, p. 27*), an illustrator based in New York, is an art director at Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

**Stanley Plumly** (*Poem, p. 63*), who died in 2019, was the author of more than a dozen books of poetry and nonfiction. "Middle Distance," a posthumous collection of poems, will be published in August.

**Sheila Marikar** (*The Talk of the Town, p. 27*), a contributor based in Los Angeles, is writing her first novel.

## THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

### THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW

The "Foxy Brown" actress Pam Grier talks with Michael Schulman about her groundbreaking career.

### THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Why shouldn't prisoners be voters? Daniel A. Gross on how the right to vote is more precarious than it seems.

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LEFT: RIKKI WRIGHT FOR THE NEW YORKER; RIGHT: ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL SAHRE

# THE MAIL

## THIS GREEN EARTH

John Cassidy's critique of continual economic growth brings welcome attention to a grave concern of many environmental scientists ("Steady State," February 10th). He nicely describes the alternative economic approach referred to as "green growth," which some people believe will allow us to "enjoy perpetual growth and prosperity while also reducing carbon emissions and our consumption of natural resources." Unfortunately, it seems that green-growth enthusiasts have drunk a more diluted batch of the same Kool-Aid as people who think that conventional growth can go on indefinitely. Perhaps economic growth can be decoupled from carbon emissions, but we still need to deal with invasive species, desertification, and other insults to natural ecosystems. Clever new technologies can help, but efficiency gains are finite and can be overwhelmed when these technologies are scaled up. A longer-term solution may require the slowing, and the eventual reversal, of population growth, combined with a decrease in average individual consumption in richer countries. The latter change will require resisting common marketing tactics. But, once many of us do so, we will suffer less financial stress and will have more time for relationships, leisure, and other delights. After forty years as an ecologist, I believe that the transition to a less materialistic world would be a cakewalk compared with living on a planet with too little photosynthesis.

*Peter C. Schulze*
*Professor of Biology and*
*Environmental Science*
*Austin College*
*Sherman, Texas*

## WAR AND PEACE

I enjoyed Adam Gopnik's review of Fergus M. Bordewich's "Congress at War" (Books, February 10th). Like Gopnik, I believe that Abraham Lincoln was central to the outcome of the Civil War, but I question whether he was always a great politician. Lincoln chose Andrew Johnson as his Vice-President because he believed that a pro-Union Southern running mate would help him win reëlection. Perhaps he was right. But, after the North won the war, Johnson did his best to guarantee that it lost the peace. Gopnik marvels at the completeness of the Union victory, which insured that secession is rarely considered anymore. But I marvel at, and grieve, the extent to which racism and an authoritarian desire to maintain white supremacy still threaten our democracy.

*Rachel Kreier*
*Port Jefferson, N.Y.*

## A FATAL ERROR

Adam Entous and Evan Osnos, in their piece about targeted killings, meticulously describe the historical background to the assassination of Qassem Suleimani ("Last Man Standing," February 10th). Although the article concludes by highlighting some of the unintended consequences of the assassination, including a stampede in Suleimani's home town which killed fifty-six people, I was surprised that it failed to mention the tragic fate of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752. It appears that the Iranian government mistakenly shot down this plane as it left Tehran, killing all one hundred and seventy-six people on board. Even if this was truly a horrific accident, it is clear that the chaotic aftermath of the drone strike on Suleimani was a contributing factor. Flight 752 is a reminder that both the short-term and long-term consequences of targeted killings are more likely to be borne by innocent civilians and foreign nationals than by people in power.

*Peter Gill*
*Toronto, Canada*

•

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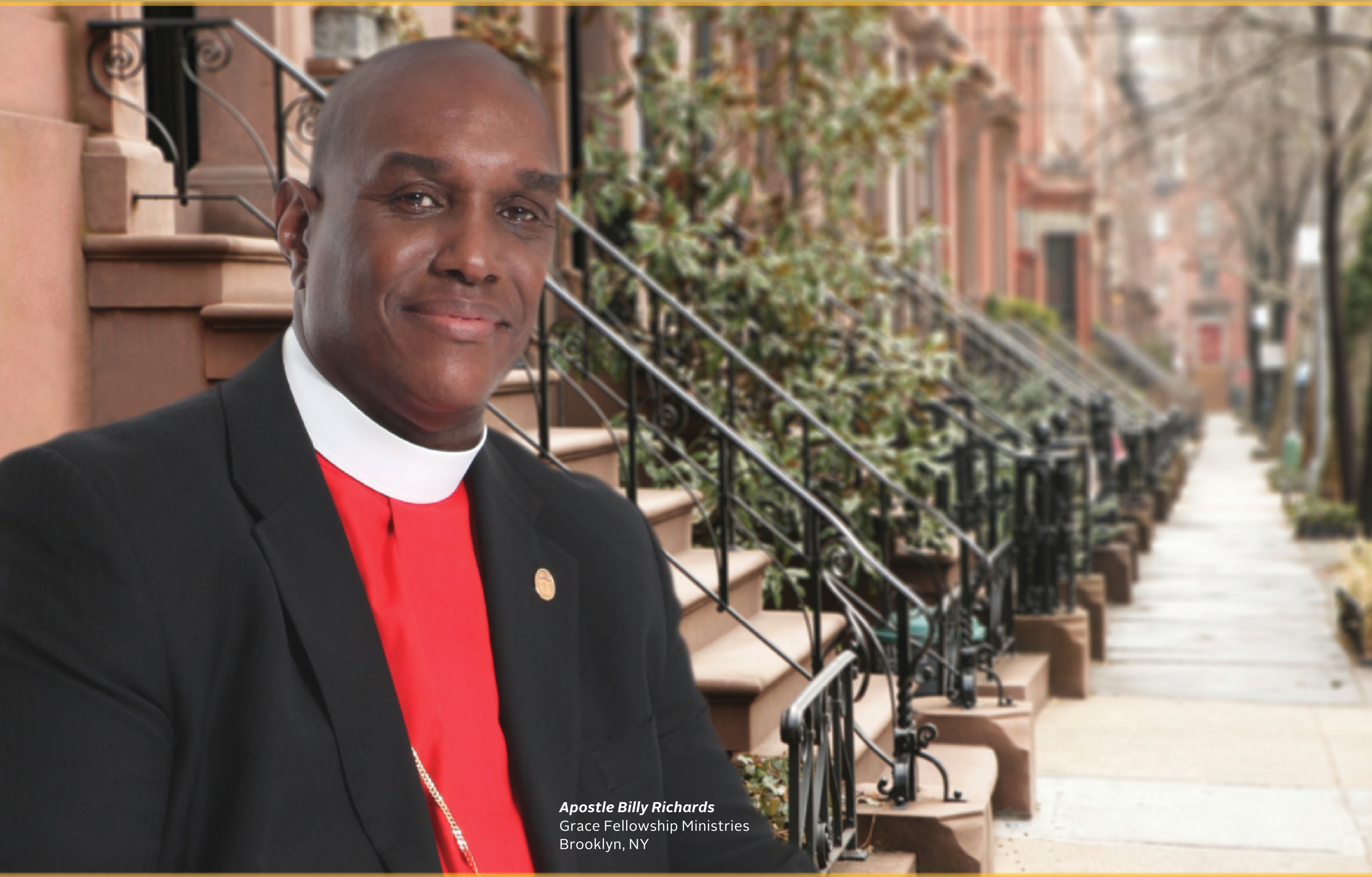

***Apostle Billy Richards***
Grace Fellowship Ministries
Brooklyn, NY

Following a routine physical, Pastor Billy Richards of Grace Fellowship Ministries in Brooklyn was referred to a urologist for further testing where he learned the news that shocked him. He had prostate cancer. After much prayer and discussion with his family, Pastor Richards decided to hold off on treatment because he did not like the options he was given, especially surgery.

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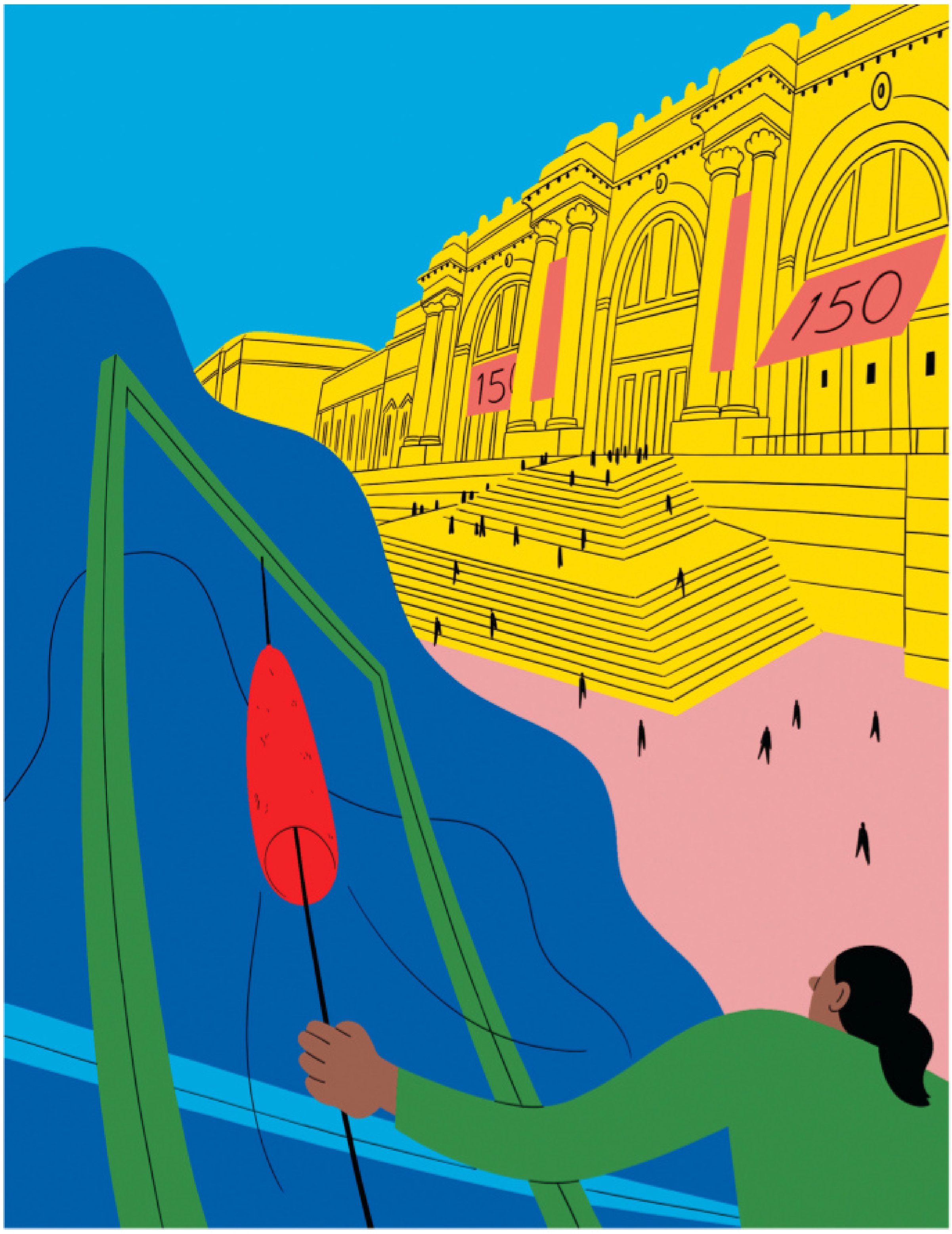
# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

Armie Hammer, last seen on Broadway in "Straight White Men," returns to the stage in Tracy Letts's **"The Minutes,"** now in previews at the Cort. Letts, who is also in the cast, tends to play stuffed shirts in movies such as "Little Women" and "Ford v Ferrari," but his plays, which include "August: Osage County" and "Bug," are darkly subversive. In "The Minutes," which ran at Chicago's Steppenwolf, he uses a small-town city-council meeting to suss out themes of power and its perversions—Trumpism writ small.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTIN SCHOELLER



SPRING PREVIEW

## Bells on the Waterfront, a Milestone at the Met

Shortly after the Metropolitan Museum of Art was founded, in 1870, Henry James wrote a prescient review of its first show, describing the selection of Old Master paintings as "an enviably solid foundation for future acquisition and development." A hundred and fifty years later, those acquisitions span more than five thousand years. The building-wide exhibition **"Making the Met: 1870-2020"** highlights a cross-section of that encyclopedic collection, from a life-size limestone statue of the Egyptian Queen Hatshepsut, made circa 1479-58 B.C., to a bronze dancer by Edgar Degas, cast in 1922. (Opens March 30.)

Climate-crisis awareness and boho chic both fuel renewed interest in the tradition of *boro*, a ragtag quilting process born of necessity, in the nineteenth century, in the wintry Japanese region of Tohoku. Fifty vintage examples are on view in **"Boro Textiles: Sustainable Aesthetics,"** at the Japan Society, alongside avant-garde piecework from such designers as Rei Kawakubo, Issey Miyake, and Yohji Yamamoto. (Opens March 6.)

Few velvet ropes (or disco balls) are more legendary than those at Studio 54. Open for less than three years (it closed in 1980), it remains an icon of glamour, glitter, and freedom, especially for the L.G.B.T.Q. community. The house of "Le Freak" lives on in the exhibition **"Studio 54: Night Magic,"** at the Brooklyn Museum, featuring six hundred and fifty photographs, fashions, film clips, soundtracks, and more. (Opens March 13.)

The times have caught up to the color-drenched mysticism of the American painter Agnes Pelton (1881-1961), who chose to work outside the mainstream throughout her career—first near the ocean in Water Mill, New York, and then in the arid climate of Cathedral City, California, near Palm Springs. The Whitney reintroduces her lucent œuvre in **"Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist."** (Opens March 13.)

Roughly a quarter of the world's prisoners reside in the U.S., a population that has soared seven hundred per cent since 1970. At MOMA PS1, the guest curator Nicole R. Fleetwood, a professor at Rutgers University, tackles this urgent subject in the exhibition **"Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration,"** which includes an extensive series of related public programs. (Opens April 5.)

Gentrification is synonymous with New York City—the irony being that the very artists who make a neighborhood magnetic are often later forced to relocate. A dozen contemporary artists contemplate this dilemma in **"After the Plaster Foundation,"** at the Queens Museum. The show's title riffs on the nickname that the underground legend Jack Smith gave the SoHo loft where he filmed and staged performances in the nineteen-sixties—until he was evicted. (Opens April 5.)

The young Bay Area sculptor **Davina Semo** gives visitors to Brooklyn Bridge Park the gift of sound and vision in her project for the Public Art Fund: a series of cast-bronze bells installed along the waterfront, which people are invited to ring. (Opens May 5.)

—*Andrea K. Scott*

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## ART

### “Peter Saul: Crime and Punishment”

New Museum

The timeliest as well as the rudest painting show of this winter happens to be the first-ever New York museum survey of this American aesthetic rapscallion. Recognition so delayed bemuses almost as much as a reminder of the artist’s current age: eighty-five, which seems impossible. Saul’s cartoony style—raucously grotesque, often with contorted figures engaged in (and quite enjoying) intricate violence, caricatures of politicians from Nixon to Trump that come off as much fond as fierce, and cheeky travesties of classic paintings by Rembrandt, Picasso, and de Kooning—suggests the gall of an adolescent allowed to run amok. It takes time to become aware of how well Saul paints, with lyrically kinetic, intertwined forms and an improbable approximation of chiaroscuro, managed with neon-toned Day-Glo acrylics. He sneaks whispery formal nuances into works whose predominant effect may be as subtle as that of a steel garbage can being kicked downstairs. Not everyone takes the time. Saul’s effrontery has long driven fastidious souls, including me years ago, from galleries. Now I see him as part of a story of art and culture that has been unspooling since the nineteen-fifties; one in which Saul, formerly a pariah, seems ever more a paladin.—*Peter Schjeldahl (Through May 31.)*

### “Vida Americana”

Whitney Museum

The subtitle of this thumpingly great show, “Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1924-1945,” picks an overdue art-historical fight. The usual story of American art in those two decades revolves around young, often immigrant aesthetes striving to absorb European modernism. A triumphalist tale composed backward from its climax—the postwar success of Abstract Expressionism—it brushes aside the prevalence, in the thirties, of politically themed figurative art: social realism, more or less, which became ideologically toxic with the onset of the Cold War. What to do with the mighty legacy of the time’s big three Mexican painters, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros? As little as possible has seemed the rule, despite the seminal influence of Orozco and Siqueiros on the young Jackson Pollock. But, with some two hundred works by sixty artists and abundant documentary material, the curator Barbara Haskell reweaves the sense and sensations of the era to bring it alive. Without the Mexican precedents of amplified scale and passionate vigor, the development of Abstract Expressionism in general, and that of Pollock in particular, lacks crucial sense. As for the politics, consider the persistently leftward tilt of American art culture ever since—a residual hankering, however sotto voce, to change the world.—*P.S. (Through May 17.)*

### Feliciano Centurión

Americas Society

**UPTOWN** This Paraguayan artist, who was based in Buenos Aires, left behind a substantial and stunning body of work in 1996, when he died, of AIDS-related complications, at the age of thirty-four. His paintings on fabric and pillows (among other textiles) utilize sentimentality—in registers both earnest and edgy—with nuanced intensity. In Centurión’s first exhibition in the U.S., curated by Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, queer aesthetics mingle with folk traditions of South America to poignant, sometimes dramatic effect. The show opens with sea-creature-themed compositions, from the early nineteen-nineties, that make ingenious use of the existing geometries of bedding, a material whose fraught, domestic allusions Centurión played with throughout his career. In the arresting “Cordero Sacrificado” (“Sacrificed Lamb”), from 1996, a dark blanket flecked with yellow paint provides a cosmic backdrop for the title’s ritual scene. Many of the smaller works here feature hand-stitched texts that range in tone from aphoristic and spiritual to observational, including the carefully embroidered, heartrendingly simple phrase “Mis glóbulos rojos aumentan” (“My red-blood-cell count increases”).—*Johanna Fateman (Through May 16.)*

### Thomas Kovachevich

Callicoon

**DOWNTOWN** This artist, who is also a physician, paints imaginary organisms on black backgrounds of corrugated plastic—the effect is of bacterial-botanical hybrids floating in outer space. “Sanctuary,” from 2017, suggests a rootless tropical tree sprouting peptide chains and mitochondria; the flowering fuchsia and gold tentacles of “Pink/Green,” from 2016, appear subaquatic. Whatever his subject, Kovachevich paints with palpable delight. The show also includes geometric installations, which are unlikely, if lovely, complements to the strange, verdant paintings. In one minimal work, forty-nine small squares of paper are pinned to the wall in a grid, curling like petals—a poetic symbol of mutability and impermanence that reflects a passion for the natural world.—*J.F. (Through March 8.)*

### Shannon Cartier Lucy

Lubov

**DOWNTOWN** Ten years ago, this painter left New York and moved back to her native Nashville. Her first show since then features six bad-dream scenes, rendered with melancholic delicacy in a faded Kodachrome palette. The gallery’s close quarters heighten the air of claustrophobia in such works as “Naptime,” in which the contents of a bedroom—including a woman asleep on a bed—are seen wrapped in plastic, and “My Signature Act,” which captures the tension of a parlor trick (in which two hands play the piano while balancing a mug and a pencil), with the gloomy gravitas of a Rembrandt. The highlight of Lucy’s comeback is the creamily painted, crystalline image of goldfish whose bowl rests, alarmingly, on the lavender flame of a gas stove.—*J.F. (Through March 8.)*

## NIGHT LIFE

*Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it’s advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

### Cam’ron

Sony Hall

Aging in music is difficult in general, but it’s particularly complicated in hip-hop, where legends can struggle to get ears (or simply respect) alongside their own progeny. Cam’ron is one of the rare exceptions: his début album dropped in 1998, and he has maintained a consistent cultural presence since. His seventh album, “Purple Haze 2,” arrived in December, nearly fifteen years to the day after its predecessor, which is widely heralded as the rapper’s apex. The latest is molded in the image of the past, but it still offers a reminder of the qualities—a sense of humor intertwined with fascinating skill—that made Cam such a favorite in the first place.—*Briana Younger (March 4.)*

### Andy Statman

Barbès

An Orthodox Jew walks into the back room of a bar and proceeds to play avant-garde jazz on the clarinet and bluegrass on the mandolin, among much else. Welcome to the manifold musical world of Andy Statman, who, in his frequent visits to this long-standing Park Slope watering hole and music space, proves that New York has always been the place to be if multiculturalism is the air you breathe.—*Steve Futterman (March 4.)*

### Joan Osborne

Café Carlyle

Artists from far outside the world of cabaret have successfully infiltrated the current Café Carlyle roster. Among the once unlikely is the alt-rock songstress Joan Osborne, best known for her ubiquitous 1995 hit “One of Us.” She draws on the work of the great, unclassifiable songwriter Tom Waits at this engagement.—*S.F. (March 4-7.)*

### 070 Shake

Webster Hall

There’s no use trying to box in 070 Shake: her music effortlessly slips in and out of genres, annexing influences as varied as contemporary hip-hop, eighties glam rock, and hazy synth pop. Her recent début, “Modus Vivendi,” serves as a formal introduction to the New Jersey native and her unique and fluid artistic vision for those who might only know her from Kanye West’s album “Ye.” If this release is any indication, 070 Shake is certainly one to follow, as the possible destinations are boundless.—*B.Y. (March 5.)*

### Ivan Smagghe

Public Records

The French electro and house staple Ivan Smagghe came to the fore of clubland in the mid-two-thousands—as a producer, for his work with the group Black Strobe, and as a

SPRING PREVIEW

# Experimental Jazz, Funky Bass, Sullen Pop

Spring soon arrives, ushered in by pop music's blossoming superstar **Billie Eilish,** whose often sullen stylings, though not exactly seasonal in mood, are sure to be one of the year's biggest draws. She plays a pair of shows, one at Madison Square Garden (March 15) and the other at the Barclays Center (March 20), as she comes off her sweep of the Grammys' biggest awards. In those arenas, she's in the company of giants, with such legacy acts as **Pearl Jam** (March 30, Madison Square Garden), **Elton John,** on his long-term farewell tour (April 6-7, Madison Square Garden and April 10-11, the Barclays Center), and **Billy Joel,** in his ongoing monthly residency (March 19 and April 10, Madison Square Garden)—but it's largely the more intimate venues that play host to the most intriguing performers.

The polymathic British producer and singer **Blood Orange** takes to Radio City Music Hall (March 20) on the heels of his latest mixtape, "Angel's Pulse," an elegant collection of outtakes that functions as an epilogue of sorts to his acclaimed 2018 album, "Negro Swan." His compatriot **Thom Yorke,** of the beloved band Radiohead, plays a show of his solo work on the same stage (March 30). Downtown, Shabaka Hutchings, a British-Barbadian saxophonist and clarinettist whose jazz fusion and experimentalism consistently prove breathtaking, brings his outfit **Shabaka and the Ancestors** to Bowery Ballroom (March 30); just a few days later, the American-born British singer **Celeste** arrives with her strikingly soulful vocals (April 2).

Elsewhere, at Terminal 5, **Davido** presents the sunny Nigerian pop of his aptly named album, "A Good Time" (March 27), and, at National Sawdust, the versatile singer-songwriter **Kimbra** teams up with **Little Kruta,** a twenty-five-piece orchestra that appears here in an all-female lineup to reimagine Kimbra's songs (March 21). Later, the ensemble provides backing to the stunning a-cappella vocalist **Madison McFerrin** (May 8).

Also in Brooklyn, **Holly Herndon** makes her BAM début (March 27) with a performance of her absorbing album "PROTO," from last year, on which she melds the human voice with electronic music and artificial intelligence in an effort to investigate our relationship—both present and future—with technology and its possibilities. Baby's All Right hosts the rising singers **UMI** (March 24) and **Arlo Parks** (April 14), and, at Brooklyn Steel, the silky-voiced crooner **Brent Faiyaz** offers a worthy conclusion to cuffing season with the jaded tunes of his latest album, "Fuck the World" (April 24).

Deeper in the borough, at Kings Theatre, **King Krule** takes the stage in honor of his anguished new album, "Man Alive!" (April 24), before crossing the river to Webster Hall (April 25). The month prior, in an unlikely pairing at Webster, the always captivating, always funky bassist **Thundercat** gets opening support from the rapper **Teejayx6,** whose comic antics and lyrics about scamming have earned him a faithful following in recent months (March 24-25). And, at another end of the musical spectrum, the unpredictable pop singer **Rina Sawayama** celebrates her forthcoming début album (May 7).

—*Briana Younger*

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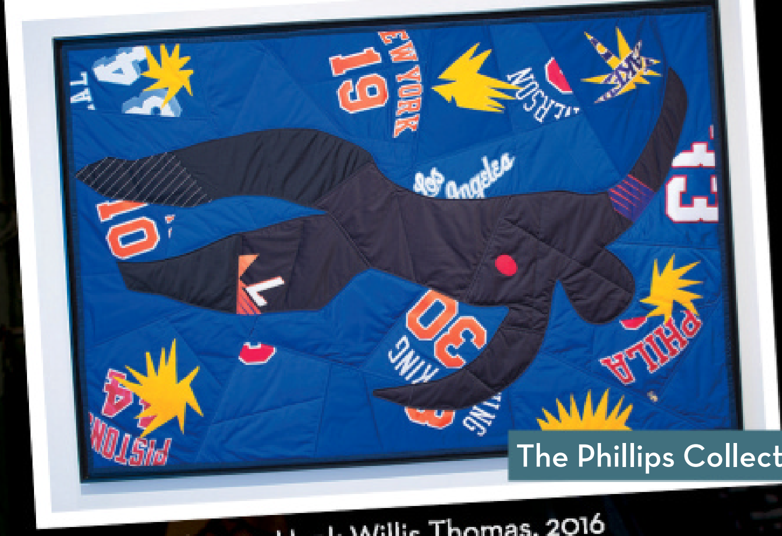


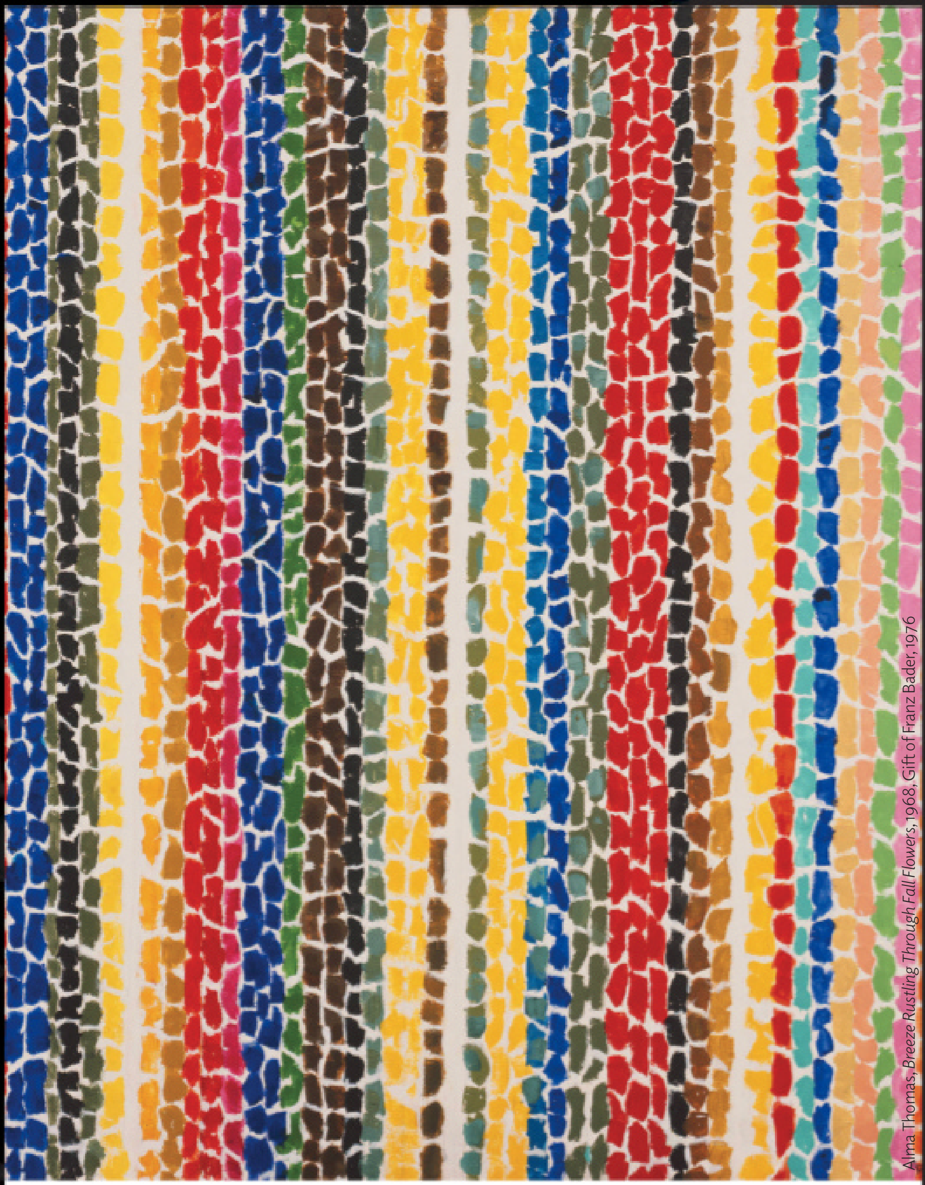
*Icarus*; Hank Willis Thomas, 2016

## MUSEUM MARVELS

The Phillips Collection examines the relationship between the work of seminal African American artists and the European modernists in *Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition* (open through May 24). An iconic naturalist and his awe-inspiring influence are detailed in *Alexander von Humboldt and the United States: Art, Nature and Culture* at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, March 20 – Aug. 16. *One with Eternity: Yayoi Kusama in the Hirshhorn Collection* (April 4 – Sept. 20) invites viewers inside two Infinity Mirror Rooms, plus it includes a photo-op with the polka dot sculpture, Pumpkin.

## CURTAINS UP

Take a trip back to 1950s New York for classic musical comedy in the form of *Guys and Dolls* at Ford's Theatre (March 13 – May 20). The magnificent music and vibrant dance routines of *Mamma Mia!* touch down at The Anthem from June 25 – July 5 thanks to Signature Theatre Company. *Hamilton* returns to the Kennedy Center from June 16 - Sept. 20, while the National Building Museum and Folger Shakespeare Library team up for *Shakespeare's Playhouse* from July 4 – Sept. 7 in the museum's Great Hall, where *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will be staged in the evenings.


Alma Thomas, *Breeze Rustling Through Fall Flowers*, 1968, Gift of Franz Bader, 1976

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based on a story and characters of Damon Runyon;
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Photo of Karen Vincent, Bueka Uwemedimo, Joe Mallon and Maria Egler by Scott Suchman.

National Cherry Blossom Festival

## TURN UP THE MUSIC

Hip-hop fans will want to head to The Howard Theatre to catch Slick Rick (April 10) and Goodie Mob (April 17). The legendary 9:30 Club features acclaimed indie acts throughout the spring, including the surf-rock stylings of Real Estate (April 21), the intimate songwriting of Waxahatchee (April 23) and the dancefloor packer that is Dan Deacon (May 2). Update to: Kesha and friend Big Freedia turn it up at The Anthem on June 2. Over at Capital One Arena, superstars grace the stage, including Tame Impala (June 6) and Harry Styles (June 28).

## MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Celebrate the arrival of spring and see DC in bloom at the National Cherry Blossom Festival (March 20 - April 12). Tour embassies for free on consecutive Saturdays (May 2 and 9) during Passport DC (May 1-31). Pedal past monuments in DC's only car-free bicycle event, DC Bike Ride (May 14). DC JazzFest presented by Events DC (June 12-21) brings stars of the genre, including Joshua Redman and Cyrus Chestnut, to the District. By the People (June 13-28) offers pop-up performances, dialogue events and art installations all over the city. Engage with the cultures of Brazil and the United Arab Emirates during the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (June 24-28, July 1-5). Before an epic celebration in honor of the women's suffrage centennial on the National Mall from Aug. 22-24, take in suffrage-themed exhibits at the National Museum of American History, the National Archives and the Library of Congress.

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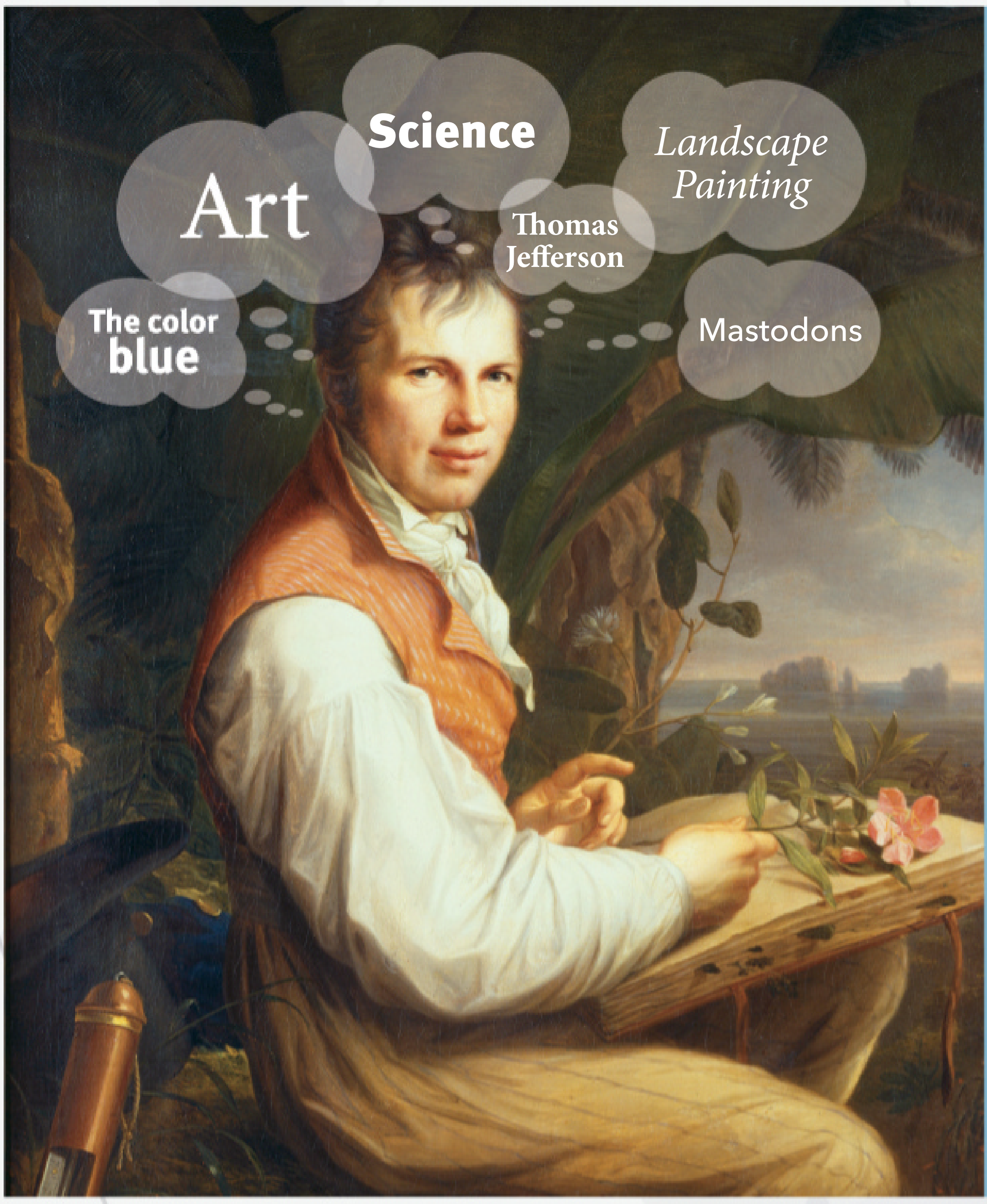

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Friedrich Georg Weitsch, *Portrait of Alexander von Humboldt* (detail), 1806, oil on canvas, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie. Photo credit: bpk Bildagentur / Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany / Klaus Goeken / Art Resource, NY.

d.j., for his 2004 mix CD “Suck My Deck”—when his propensity for tingeing his sets with rock guitars clicked with the era’s Zeitgeist. These days, such eclecticism is the norm, but Smagghe’s taste for propulsive riffs and his dramatic use of filtering effects still make his appearances a reliably good time.—*Michaelangelo Matos (March 5.)*

### Dry Cleaning
Saint Vitus

The glamorously intelligent post-punk that was incubated in English art colleges forty years ago is reconstituted with panache in Dry Cleaning: it’s almost shocking to hear lyrics referencing not Margaret Thatcher but Meghan Markle. This young London quartet is effortlessly magnetic and impossibly British, with an ace card in Florence Shaw—a vocalist who rarely deigns to sing but, rather, presents her lyrics as if engaged in an apathetic phone conversation. After making its American début at Saint Vitus, the band plays Union Pool the following night.—*Jay Ruttenberg (March 6.)*

### Boss Baritones
Smalls

Frank Basile and Gary Smulyan share a mutual affection for the baritone—a leviathan of the saxophone family—and for the work of the late Pepper Adams, the booting baritone-meister of classic hard bop. Co-chairing a quintet that includes the pianist Ehud Asherie, these two rugged stylists will engulf the room in swinging subterranean tones.—*S.F. (March 6-7.)*

### Maurice Fulton
Le Bain at the Standard

There’s always something a little wobbly going on in the music that Maurice Fulton is involved with. The New York native is nominally a house producer and d.j.—often working with dance vocalists such as Kathy Diamond and Róisín Murphy—but his true lineage is in the disco of cult artists like Patrick Adams, who specialized in tracks that chugged along with a bent suavity. Naturally, the latter are the kinds of oldies that Fulton spins, alongside plenty of his own material.—*M.M. (March 7.)*

### Bonnie (Prince) Billy
Town Hall

Jonathan Richman and Will Oldham are separated by generation, stage temperament, and style of song. Yet when Oldham, a.k.a. Bonnie (Prince) Billy, explained to an interviewer that he shared “more things with [Richman] than most people in music,” it made immediate sense: these charismatic singers both have a flamboyant obstinacy that no doubt frustrates their loved ones but lends their work a cool air of purity. This double bill closes with Oldham’s abstruse Americana and opens with Richman, whose knock-’em-dead stage show has been rock’s open secret for half a century.—*J.R. (March 9.)*

### Dashboard Confessional
Webster Hall

Dashboard Confessional’s début, “The Swiss Army Romance,” was largely just a man, Chris Carrabba, and his guitar laying bare his feelings in songs that were equally wounded and raw. Twenty years—and a few inspired generations of emo music—have passed since the album’s release, but returning to it now still feels revelatory; melancholy is never exactly comfortable, and that kind of shameless expression doesn’t get any easier with age. To mark its two decades of existence, the band hits the road to play the songs that helped so many fans to see themselves.—*B.Y. (March 10-11.)*

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

### Ax, Kavakos, and Ma
Carnegie Hall

This season, a steady stream of classical artists pour through Carnegie Hall’s gilded gates to pay their respects to Beethoven on the occasion of his two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday. The pianist Emanuel Ax, the violinist Leonidas Kavakos, and the cellist Yo-Yo Ma combine their considerable star power for three concerts of the composer’s cello and violin sonatas and piano trios. Also playing: The Orchestra of St. Luke’s gets in on the celebration with a wide-ranging consideration of Beethoven’s output (March 5 at 8), including the Mass in C Major, with the soloists Karina Gauvin, Kelley O’Connor, Andrew Haji, and Matthew Brook.—*Oussama Zahr (March 4 and March 6 at 8 and March 8 at 2.)*

### yMusic
Rockwood Music Hall

A heterodox sextet with an unorthodox approach, yMusic was bending rules and blazing trails long before its recent high-profile ventures with the likes of Paul Simon, Bruce Hornsby, and Ben Folds. “Ecstatic Science,” the group’s newly released fourth album, comprises elegant, individualistic works by Missy Mazzoli, Caroline Shaw, Gabriella Smith, and Paul Wiancko, each piece benefitting from the band’s road-seasoned polish and cohesion.—*Steve Smith (March 5 at 7.)*

### New York Philharmonic
David Geffen Hall

The stylish conductor Louis Langrée, the music director of the Mostly Mozart Festival and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, makes his New York Philharmonic début with a ravishing mix of works. The mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard is featured in Ravel’s luscious “Shéhérazade,” which is nestled among Debussy’s “Prélude à l’Après-Midi d’un Faune” and “Nocturnes” and Scriabin’s “Le Poème de l’Extase.”—*S.S. (March 5 and 10 at 7:30 and March 7 at 8.)*

### Dai Fujikura
Miller Theatre

The Japanese composer Dai Fujikura is a Pierre Boulez acolyte whose music has little in common with that of his late mentor, apart from a shared penchant for imaginative architecture and voluptuous timbres. For this richly warranted “Composer Portrait” program, the International Contemporary Ensemble offers works spanning fifteen years of association with Fujikura, from “abandoned time,” a toothy early encounter created in 2004, to “Gliding Wings,” a world première co-commissioned by Miller Theatre.—*S.S. (March 5 at 8.)*

### Diderot String Quartet
Church of the Intercession

In the Met’s current run of Handel’s “Agrippina,” Harry Bicket conducts the orchestra in a lavish performance from his seat at the harpsichord. For a more intimate look at the esteemed maestro’s keyboard work, “The Crypt Sessions” taps him on his night off for a concert with the Diderot String Quartet in the forty-nine-seat chapel of the Church of the Intercession. Their program of honest-to-goodness Baroque rarities includes buoyant pieces by Dario Castello, Johann Philipp Krieger, Francesco Durante, and Georg Muffat, plus a reconstruction of Bach’s Suite in A Minor, BWV 1067.—*O.Z. (March 6 at 7.)*

### “Der Fliegende Holländer”
Metropolitan Opera House

The director and filmmaker François Girard returns to the Met for a new production of Wagner’s “Der Fliegende Holländer,” seven years after making his company début with a revelatory staging of the composer’s “Parsifal.” The two operas are Wagner’s first and last entries in the canon, with “Holländer” hinting at the command of instrumental color and mythmaking that finds its apotheosis in “Parsifal.” The powerful bass-baritone Evgeny Nikitin steps in for Bryn Terfel, who was forced to drop out owing to injury, as the Flying Dutchman, and Anja Kampe makes her Met début as Senta; Valery Gergiev conducts.—*O.Z. (March 6 and March 10 at 8.)*

### Talea Ensemble
92nd Street Y

The Talea Ensemble performs the U.S. première of Toshio Hosokawa’s “Futari Shizuka,” a chamber opera based on a Noh play about a spirit that enters a woman’s body. It uses Western- and Noh-style singing to differentiate between the two characters, and it appears on a double bill with another chamber opera about possession: George Benjamin’s “Into the Little Hill,” a striking, minimalist setting of the Pied Piper legend in which two singers assume all the roles. James Baker conducts the cast and ensemble in a semi-staged concert.—*O.Z. (March 7 at 8.)*

### Chamber Music Society
Alice Tully Hall

Robert Schumann’s Piano Quintet in E-Flat Major, a groundbreaking work in 1842, is granted headline status for this Chamber Music Society program. But the real draw here is “IF,” a new piece for soprano and ensemble by the eminent composer John Harbison, co-commissioned by the Society. Joélle Harvey lends her voice to its New York première, and to music by Schubert and Chausson.—*S.S. (March 8 at 5.)*

ILLUSTRATION BY ALVA SKOG

SPRING PREVIEW

# An Opera Diva, Beethoven, Bartók

This year marks the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of Beethoven's birth, and Carnegie Hall is taking charge of the celebration. **Yannick Nézet-Séguin** conducts the symphonies with the **Philadelphia Orchestra** (March 13, March 20, March 26, and April 3), and a pantheon of celebrated talents covers the keyboard repertoire—**András Schiff** (April 2 and April 5), **Mitsuko Uchida** (April 7), **Yefim Bronfman** (April 21), **Emanuel Ax** (May 14), and **Maurizio Pollini** (May 17) among them. In Zankel Hall, the **Ébène Quartet** performs the composer's sixteen string quartets across six concerts, an endurance test if ever there was one (April 17-19, April 30, and May 1-2).

Not to be entirely eclipsed, Bartók also claims a spotlight: the **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center** programs his rhythmically ferocious masterpiece Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion (March 15), and the grotesquerie of his pantomime ballet suite **"The Miraculous Mandarin"** appears a few weeks later at David Geffen Hall (March 26-28). On that same stage, **Simon Rattle** conducts the **London Symphony Orchestra** in performances of "Bluebeard's Castle" (May 3-4). In a fitting nod to both composers, the **Emerson Quartet** serves up a predictable but insightful pairing of Beethoven's "Razumovsky" cycle with Bartók's quartets (March 31, April 21, and May 5).

The New York Philharmonic features several Russian superstars. **Valery Gergiev** leads Stravinsky's "Petrushka," with **Denis Matsuev** joining the orchestra for Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto (March 12-14). The following month, Matsuev's young compatriot **Daniil Trifonov** headlines four concerts (April 15-16, April 18, and April 21). Across the plaza, Anna Netrebko reigns as the M.V.P. of the Metropolitan Opera with her reprisal of the title role in David McVicar's production of **"Tosca"** (March 26-April 18). And, to round out the Met's season, intimate tragedy finds expression in Janáček's **"Káťa Kabanová,"** which features Susanna Phillips, Dolora Zajick, and John Tomlinson in only three performances (May 2-9). Seize the opportunity; it hasn't played there since 2005.

Brooklyn caters to those with a taste for the new. At National Sawdust, **JACK Quartet** plays John Zorn's string quartets (March 13-14), and the singer **Lucy Dhegrae** continues her journey into the heart of trauma with the third concert in her "I Was Breathing" series (March 28). Areté hosts album releases for two emerging ensembles: **Treesearch** explores the boundary between improvised and composed music (March 22), and **Latitude 49** advocates for fresh voices with an array of contemporary works (March 24).

—*Hélène Werner*

THE THEATRE

## Cambodian Rock Band

### Pershing Square Signature Center

Fact and fiction, past and present are interwoven in Lauren Yee's play with music. When a young Cambodian-American, Neary (Courtney Reed), arrives in Phnom Penh to help prosecute Comrade Duch (Francis Jue), a real-life Khmer Rouge official who oversaw the killing of thousands in the notorious prison camp S21, she does not realize that the case is going to hit so close to home. A flashback takes us to 1975, when the rise of the genocidal Communist regime put an end to the young rock band the Cyclos—and we discover what happened to the guitarist Chum (Joe Ngo) and the bassist Leng (Moses Villarama). Yee's storytelling is undermined by credibility-testing coincidences, but Chay Yew's production, for the Signature Theatre, comes alive when the actors turn into the Cyclos to perform songs by vintage Cambodian artists and the contemporary Los Angeles band Dengue Fever.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through March 15.)*

## Chekhov/Tolstoy: Love Stories

### Theatre Row

Presenting these two short, evocative one-acts under the rubric "Love Stories" is perfectly correct, though it does undersell them a bit. "The Artist," directed by Jonathan Bank, and "Michael," directed by Jane Shaw, were adapted, by Miles Malleson, from short stories by Anton Chekhov and Leo Tolstoy, respectively—two guys who weren't afraid of tackling the big issues and who grapple here with questions of morality, social justice, the role of the artist, and miracles of Christianity. Malleson, an English actor, playwright, and pacifist, devised these elegant reconfigurations as the Great War was coming to a close; Bank's Mint Theatre pairs them for the first time, in productions that are thoroughly handsome and thought-provoking. A cast of seven performs the two plays, featuring Henry Clarke and the incandescent nonagenarian Vinie Burrows.—*Ken Marks (Through March 14.)*

## Dana H.

### Vineyard

In 1997, a woman named Dana Higginbotham was abducted by an ex-convict and member of the Aryan Brotherhood. He dragged her from motel to motel around the South for five months, abusing her physically and mentally. Higginbotham happens to be the mother of the playwright Lucas Hnath ("A Doll's House, Part 2," "Hillary and Clinton"), who turned the story into a play. And not just any play—this is a channelling, an exorcism, and a tribute. The brilliant concept is that the actress Deirdre O'Connell, alone onstage, lip-synchs—with virtuosic precision—to edited segments of interviews with the actual Dana H. (Steve Cosson, the artistic director of the docu-theatre company the Civilians, conducted the interviews, in 2015.) Directed by Les Waters with chilling precision and his usual skill for creating an eerie atmosphere, this Vineyard Theatre production is as stunning as it is harrowing.—*E.V. (Through April 11.)*

## Dracula

### Classic Stage Company

Bram Stoker's gothic novel gets a girl-power gloss from the playwright Kate Hamill, who specializes in renovating classic works of literature to suit millennial sensibilities. On a trip to Transylvania, the Englishman Jonathan Harker (Michael Crane) arrives at the castle of Dracula (Matthew Amendt), a nobleman with a taste for white linen and human blood. Meanwhile, Harker's wife, Mina (Kelley Curran), and her spunky friend Lucy (Jamie Ann Romero) amuse themselves at an insane asylum run by Lucy's sweetheart, Dr. Seward (Matthew Saldivar), until the Count and his minions come for them, too. Hamill tries to make a tale of female persecution into one of female empowerment: the vampire hunter Dr. Van Helsing is now a woman (Jessica Frances Dukes), and so is the mental patient Renfield (Hamill, screeching like a crow); Dracula is "toxic" rather than sexy, and the other men are cowards or dupes. Far duller than the novel, the play manages to condescend to both contemporary women and their nineteenth-century counterparts. Directed by Sarna Lapine, who keeps the tone ping-ponging between "The Importance of Being Earnest" and a budget haunted house. In repertory with "Frankenstein."—*Alexandra Schwartz (Through March 8.)*

## Fandango for Butterflies

### Various locations

This warmhearted show, written by Andrea Thome and inspired by interviews with undocumented immigrants from Latin America, is set in a church in lower Manhattan, where friends come together to set aside their troubles for an evening of song and dance. Among them are Mariposa (Jen Anaya), who came to New York from Mexico as a teen-ager and serves as the group's maternal figure, though her precarious circumstances make her reluctant to have a family of her own, and the comedic Honduran cousins Rogelio (Carlo Albán) and Elvin (Andrés Quintero), who are waiting for a third relative making the dangerous journey north. The pain inherent in these stories is often exploited for flattening dramatic effect, but the director, José Zayas, gives his actors the dignity of joy, and lets them bloom. With music by Sinuhé Padilla that will make you want to sing along, and supertitles in Spanish.—*A.S. (The production is touring all five boroughs; see engardearts.org/fandango for schedule. Through March 28.)*

## Frankenstein

### Classic Stage Company

The reason to see this slight adaptation of Mary Shelley's novel, written by Tristan Bernays and directed by Timothy Douglas, comes in the show's first twenty minutes, when Stephanie Berry, as Frankenstein's creature, stirs to life. With remarkable physical expressiveness and subtlety, Berry conveys the process by which animal curiosity is molded into sentience through sight, smell, and touch; her vulnerability will break your heart. The rest of this eighty-minute show, which takes a SparkNotes approach to its source material, feels like an afterthought. The only other person onstage is the oddly cast Rob Morrison, who does not so

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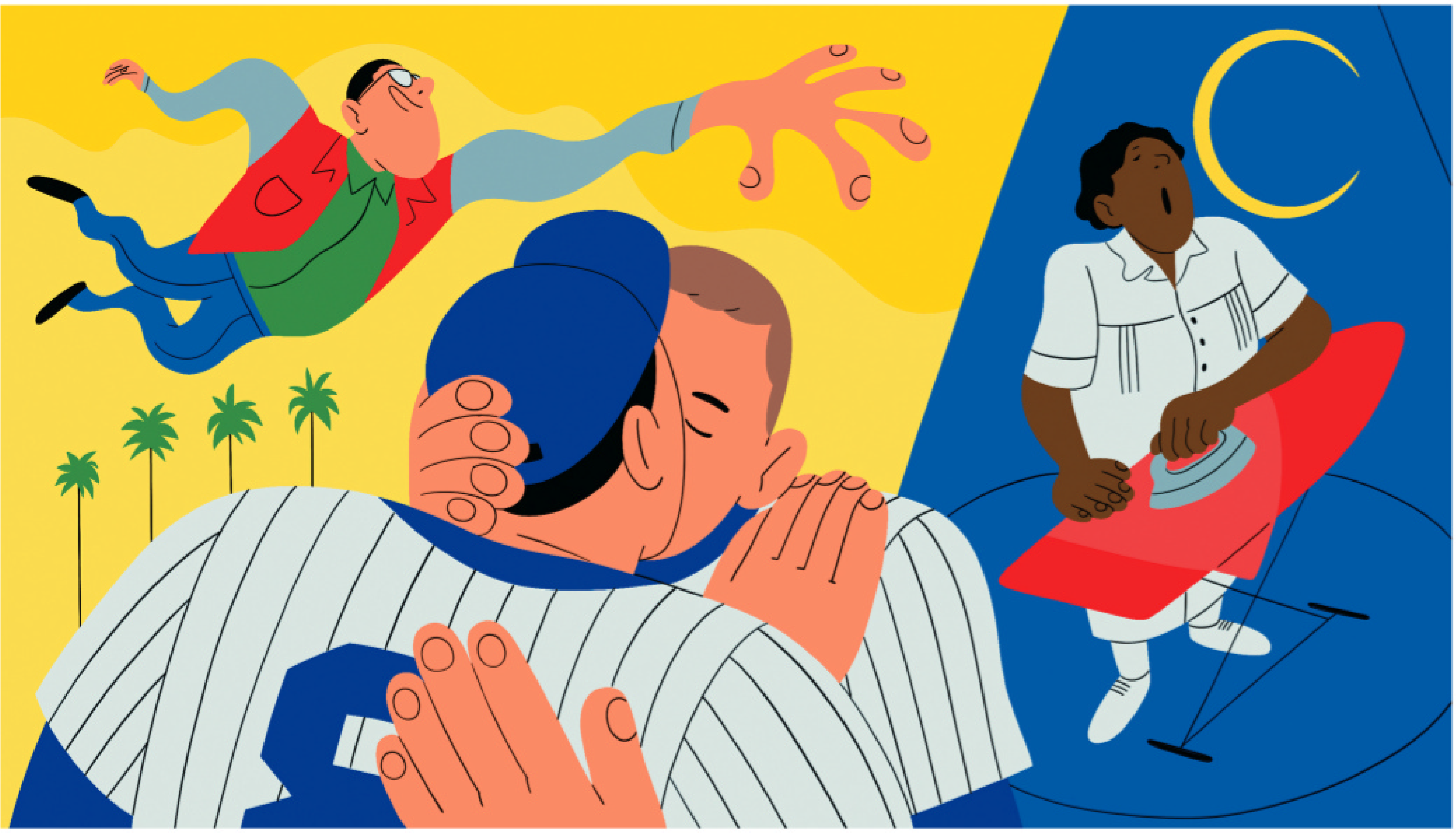

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SPRING PREVIEW

## LSD Fantasy, a Sarah Silverman Musical

"During my LSD sessions, I would learn a great deal," Cary Grant once said. In the late fifties and early sixties, when the drug was used as an experimental medical aid, Grant regularly took supervised acid trips at the Psychiatric Institute of Beverly Hills. (He once envisioned himself as a penis launching from Earth like a rocket ship.) **"Flying Over Sunset,"** a new musical by James Lapine, Tom Kitt, and Michael Korie, imagines a 1957 trip shared by Grant (Tony Yazbeck) and two other luminaries known to have dabbled in LSD—the ambassador Clare Boothe Luce (Carmen Cusack) and the author Aldous Huxley (Harry Hadden-Paton). Lapine's production, for Lincoln Center Theatre, starts previews on March 12, at the Vivian Beaumont.

Somehow, the LSD musical isn't the one with the singing laundry machine. That would be **"Caroline, or Change,"** Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori's 2004 tale of a black maid working for a Jewish family in Louisiana during the civil-rights era. An underappreciated gem, it returns to Broadway via London's West End, directed by Michael Longhurst and starring Sharon D Clarke. (Previews begin March 13, at Studio 54.) **"Sing Street,"** a musical based on the 2016 John Carney film, about a teen-age Dublin boy who starts a band in the new-wave nineteen-eighties, moves uptown after a winter run Off Broadway. Carney and Gary Clark wrote the songs, with a book by Enda Walsh and direction by Rebecca Taichman (March 26, Lyceum).

Also on Broadway, Neil Pepe directs Laurence Fishburne, Sam Rockwell, and Darren Criss in **"American Buffalo,"** David Mamet's popular play from 1975, set at a junk shop (March 24, Circle in the Square). Mary-Louise Parker and David Morse return to roles they originated in 1997, in Paula Vogel's **"How I Learned to Drive,"** about a woman reckoning with being sexually abused by her uncle; Mark Brokaw directs the Manhattan Theatre Club production (March 27, Samuel J. Friedman). At Second Stage, Jesse Tyler Ferguson and Jesse Williams star in Richard Greenberg's 2002 comedy **"Take Me Out,"** directed by Scott Ellis, in which a pro baseball player comes out as gay (April 2, Hayes). In John Benjamin Hickey's revival of the 1968 Neil Simon comedy **"Plaza Suite,"** Sarah Jessica Parker and Matthew Broderick play three different couples who stay in the same hotel room (March 13, Hudson).

Off Broadway premières include **"The Visitor,"** a musical version of the 2007 film, in which an economics professor (David Hyde Pierce) finds two undocumented immigrants (Ari'el Stachel and Alysha Deslorieux) living in his old apartment (March 24, Public). Claire Foy and Matt Smith, both late of "The Crown," reunite in **"Lungs,"** Duncan Macmillan's portrait of a couple deciding whether to bring a child into a world threatened by ecological doom (March 25, BAM's Harvey Theatre). And Sarah Silverman turns her comedic memoir, **"The Bedwetter,"** into a musical, co-written by Joshua Harmon ("Bad Jews") and Fountains of Wayne's Adam Schlesinger (April 25, Atlantic Theatre Company).

—*Michael Schulman*

much play Dr. Frankenstein as stand in for the character while providing incongruous musical accompaniment on the banjo and mandolin. In repertory with “Dracula.”—*A.S. (Through March 8.)*

## The Headlands
### Claire Tow

Henry (Aaron Yoo) works as an engineer in Google’s San Francisco office, but he’s not interested in talking about that; his passion is amateur sleuthing, and he’s especially eager to solve a murder that took place when he was ten years old. Elegantly directed by Knud Adams, Christopher Chen’s ingeniously constructed new drama—a novel blend of twisty whodunnit, family mystery, immigrant tale, and memory play—finds ample humor early on, in the contrast between Henry’s upbeat affability and his grim hobby, but then turns unexpectedly and profoundly haunting. The design elements all work in satisfying unity, and a standout is Ruey Horng Sun’s unusually excellent projections, which take their cue from Henry’s love of film noir and generate a gorgeously gloomy mood from the story he uncovers.—*Rollo Romig (Through March 22.)*

## Tumacho
### Connelly

Leigh Silverman directs this revival of Ethan Lipton’s silly, kindhearted 2016 musical Western, about “a one-horse town / where the horse broke down” presided over by an ostentatiously useless mayor (John Ellison Conlee). Among his dwindling constituents is a traumatized gunslinger (Phillipa Soo) whose revenge mission against a casually murderous outlaw (Andrew Garman) is diverted by the terrible return of an insatiable demon-ghost. David Zinn’s sunset-saturated saloon set is a work of beauty, and Lipton has a winning way with rhymes (“It takes practice / to love a cactus”). In the end, it’s maybe too gentle a fable of forgiveness and reconciliation; it could have had a bit more bite if it had found a way to link those notions more deliberately to the Western’s quintessential Americanness.—*R.R. (Through March 21.)*

## We’re Gonna Die
### Second Stage

Young Jean Lee wrote the script and lyrics of this hilarious, wrenching, and wise monologue interspersed with fine, bright songs about loneliness, sickness, aging, and death. It’s a show in which a song with a chorus of “When you get old / All your friends will die / And you will be a burden to the world” is a full-on banger and, weirdly, makes you feel better. In its original production, in 2011, a lot of its charm emanated from its indie spareness and from Lee’s own unstudied performance as the lead. Here that role goes to Janelle McDermoth, who’s a total star, with endless charisma and a magnificent voice. As directed and choreographed by Raja Feather Kelly, this version’s staging is sleeker (Tuce Yasak designed the dazzling lighting) and its arrangements poppier. But it works just as well because McDermoth never plays it falsely.—*R.R. (Through March 22.)*

## West Side Story
### Broadway Theatre

An infuriating example of what happens when a powerful style calcifies into shtick. For his fourth outing on Broadway, the Belgian director Ivo van Hove has given himself a gorgeous, youthful, diverse cast to work with—Isaac Powell as a lithe and jittery Tony and the spirited Shereen Pimentel as Maria are highlights, as are Yesenia Ayala’s Anita and Dharon E. Jones’s Riff—only to dwarf them with video footage streamed on billboard-size screens above their heads. As a metaphor—for the insignificance of these characters’ lives in a hostile world, perhaps?—the technique is banal; as a theatrical device, it is a ludicrous waste. As is his wont, van Hove has amplified the play’s darker elements and snuffed out any lightness that might temper its tragedy. (Farewell, “I Feel Pretty.”) This is all the more disappointing considering all that is promising here, including Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker’s choreography, which closes the gap between modernist constructivism and TikTok preening, and the exquisite rumble scene, which offers a startling glimpse of what van Hove could do were he to return to eye level and reground himself in the idiom of the stage.—*A.S. (Reviewed in our issue of 3/2/20.) (Open run.)*

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## MOVIES

## Bacurau

The title of Kleber Mendonça Filho’s boldly inventive political fantasy, set in the near future, refers to a fictitious small town in rural Brazil that’s at the center of a hotly contested election and a fierce dispute over natural resources. The village’s idiosyncratic and temperamental characters are held together by a web of memories and traditions. Their water supply has been cut off by a huge dam, which serves business interests represented by a politician named Tony Junior (Thardelly Lima). After the townspeople mock him and his campaign, they find themselves under attack from an international group of mercenaries; they suspect that the timing isn’t coincidental, and, despite being vastly outgunned, they fight back. Mendonça deftly sketches the personalities and the passions of Bacurau’s besieged residents while also examining the mercenaries’ cruel power; the light touches of science fiction evoke present-day depravities, and the vision of local unity offers a thrillingly imaginative playbook for resistance. With Sônia Braga, Barbara Colen, and Udo Kier. In Portuguese and English.—*Richard Brody (In limited release.)*

## The Call of the Wild

Jack London’s novel returns to the screen, though whether any movie can capture the essence of the book—so earthy in its hunger for sensation yet so grandly spirited—is open to debate. This new attempt, written by Michael Green and directed by Chris Sanders, goes easy on the wildness, perhaps in the hope of corralling a family audience. The principal human roles are taken by Dan Stevens, as an overheated villain who’s ill equipped for the icy rigors of the Far North, and by Harrison Ford, as the grizzled adventurer John Thornton, who also narrates the film and gets saddled with a heftier back-

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SPRING PREVIEW

# Personal Problems, Political Crises

Family life is at the center of Eliza Hittman's third feature, **"Never Rarely Sometimes Always"** (March 13), about Autumn (Sidney Flanigan), a seventeen-year-old high-school student from a small Pennsylvania town who discovers that she's pregnant and, unable to get an abortion in the state without parental consent, travels to New York with a cousin (Talia Ryder) for the procedure. The French drama **"The Truth"** (March 20), the director Hirokazu Kore-eda's first feature outside Japan, stars Catherine Deneuve as an actress who writes a memoir and Juliette Binoche as her daughter, who returns to Paris for the book's publication and disputes its claims. Ethan Hawke co-stars.

Among the season's most prominent releases are adaptations from earlier works, both literary and cinematic, including **"Charm City Kings"** (April 10), a drama about Baltimore's dirt-bike culture, starring Teyonah Parris, Jahi Di'Allo Winston, and the musician Meek Mill. Ángel Manuel Soto directed; Barry Jenkins co-wrote the story, which is based on Lotfy Nathan's 2013 documentary "12 O'Clock Boys." Luca Marinelli stars in **"Martin Eden"** (April 17), the Italian director Pietro Marcello's adaptation of Jack London's 1909 novel, about a poor sailor and aspiring writer who falls in love with a bourgeois woman and, after becoming a socialist, comes into conflict with her. Dev Patel stars in **"The Personal History of David Copperfield"** (May 8), an adaptation of Charles Dickens's novel, directed by Armando Iannucci, who wrote the script with Simon Blackwell. Peter Capaldi co-stars as Mr. Micawber.

A wide range of historical subjects will be spotlighted this spring in a variety of genres. The journalist Andrea Chalupa wrote **"Mr. Jones"** (April 3), directed by Agnieszka Holland, based on the true story of a Welsh journalist (played by James Norton) who, in the early nineteen-thirties, discovers the Soviet Union's extermination by famine of Ukrainians—and finds his reports denied by the regime's American and European sympathizers. Joseph Mawle co-stars as George Orwell. Marjane Satrapi directed **"Radioactive"** (April 24), a bio-pic about Marie Curie, starring Rosamund Pike, based on a graphic novel by Lauren Redniss; Sam Riley plays Pierre Curie. In **"Antebellum"** (April 24), the first feature directed by Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz (who also co-wrote the script), Janelle Monáe plays a writer who gets trapped in an imaginary world of horror. Eric Lange, Jena Malone, Kiersey Clemons, and Gabourey Sidibe co-star.

Classic franchises will be getting new workouts, as in **"No Time to Die"** (April 8), the twenty-fifth film in the James Bond franchise, starring Daniel Craig in his final performance as 007. It's directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga, who co-wrote the script with Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Neal Purvis, and Robert Wade; the cast includes Rami Malek, Léa Seydoux, Lashana Lynch, Naomie Harris, Christoph Waltz, Jeffrey Wright, and Ralph Fiennes. Reese Witherspoon returns as Elle Woods in **"Legally Blonde 3"** (May 8), directed by Jamie Suk and co-starring Alanna Ubach and Jessica Cauffiel.

—*Richard Brody*

story than he deserves. As for Buck, the mighty canine hero, he is played not by a well-trained dog but, thanks to the miracle of C.G.I., by a congregation of pixels. There are times when you believe in the result and times when you definitely don't.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 3/2/20.) (In wide release.)*

### An Easy Girl

The plot of Rebecca Zlotowski's passionate and finely observed drama is bracingly spare: at the end of the school year, Naïma (Mina Farid), a sixteen-year-old girl in Cannes whose mother works in a hotel kitchen, is visited by Sofia (Zahia Dehar), her twenty-two-year-old Parisian cousin who's living in the fast lane and making money quickly, with no obvious form of work. Sofia befriends a pair of high-finance yachtsmen (Nuno Lopes and Benoît Magimel), and, for about ten days, Naïma follows Sofia into their high-society whirl, savoring its comforts and thrilling to its temptations—and then Naïma returns to her ordinary life. From this simple premise, Zlotowski develops a complex array of dramatic subtleties and psychological nuances and, with poised yet urgent images that stay close to Naïma, evokes her conflicting impulses and shifting ideas. Against the backdrop of Naïma's regular rounds—including her friendship with a gay classmate and aspiring actor (Lakdhar Dridi)—her partly perceptive and partly bewildered view of the rich and the powerful emerges as a crucial apprenticeship in the ways of the world. In French.—*R.B. (Film at Lincoln Center, March 7 and March 12.)*

### Emma.

Anya Taylor-Joy, who made such an impact in "The Witch" (2015), stars in a slightly different costume drama, one with improved interior décor and less demonic possession. In this new adaptation of Jane Austen's novel, Taylor-Joy plays Emma Woodhouse, whose matchmaking causes no end of trouble. Mia Goth is Harriet Smith, the malleable innocent whom Emma endeavors to link with a range of unsuitable men: a minister (Josh O'Connor), a bounder (Callum Turner), and a wealthy neighbor, Mr. Knightley (Johnny Flynn), who has other designs in mind. The film, directed by Autumn de Wilde from a screenplay by Eleanor Catton, undergoes a notable change: initially smart, silly, primped, and somewhat pleased with itself, it grows more serious as time goes on. The fact that the heroine follows the same arc in her acquisition of wisdom is no coincidence. With Bill Nighy as Emma's nervous father.—*A.L. (3/2/20) (In wide release.)*

### First Cow

After a protracted exposition, this new film by Kelly Reichardt, based on a novel by Jon Raymond (who wrote the script with her), delivers a mighty rush of suspense that nonetheless sacrifices character and context. Otis (Cookie) Figowitz (played by John Magaro), a cook in eighteen-twenties Oregon trained as a baker, and recently freed from indentured servitude to trappers, shares a shack with an ambitious Chinese immigrant named King Lu (Orion Lee). They team up nightly to steal milk from the only cow in the area so that Cookie can make fried cakes, which quickly become a local delicacy. They rush to cash in on the scheme—to avoid being caught by a local official (Toby Jones) who owns the cow. Reichardt films the workingmen's friendship and their frustrated strivings sympathetically, and observes with dismay the official's domineering ways and pretentious airs, but she reduces the protagonists to stick figures in a deterministic landscape.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*

### The Invisible Man

The fantastic premise of H. G. Wells's 1897 science-fiction novel gets a cleverly diabolical and philosophical twist in this horror film, written and directed by Leigh Whannell. It stars Elisabeth Moss as Cecilia Kass, an architect who escapes the lavish and sealed-off estate of a cruelly controlling boyfriend, Adrian Griffin (Oliver Jackson-Cohen), a fabulously wealthy inventor. She fearfully takes shelter in the home of a police-officer friend (Aldis Hodge); soon thereafter, Adrian reportedly kills himself, naming her one of his heirs—and an invisible presence begins to wreak new havoc on Cecilia's life. She suspects that Adrian is the culprit and, as a result, her sanity is questioned, but she nonetheless fights back, seeking the horrible truth. The movie's pacing and dialogue are straight-to-cable, but the action, with its many layers of psychological manipulation, is deft and exciting. Whannell makes insightful use of technology and its perversions, and his sense of horror is, above all, moral—leading to a revenge plot of fervent showmanship.—*R.B. (In wide release.)*

### Lime Kiln Club Field Day

This silent slapstick romance, shot in 1913 and left unfinished, features the grandly imaginative Bert Williams—the leading black performer of the time and an enduring comic genius—as a poor suitor of a local beauty (Odessa Warren Grey, in her only film performance). Williams's character is an ambitious dreamer and a big-hearted prankster who stumbles on a get-rich-quick gimmick that happens to work—until it doesn't. Williams plays the role in blackface; he's the only actor in the cast to do so, and the masklike makeup transforms him into an archetype. (He was consciously contending with the conventions of minstrelsy, as he did in his stage performances.) The directors, Edwin Middleton and T. Hayes Hunter, bring a jovial playfulness to the film and sensibly keep Williams at its center, giving him closeups—something of a novelty at the time—that amply display his inventiveness from one take to the next. The movie brings to the fore Williams's mighty energy, tender heart, and thwarted dreams.—*R.B. (MOMA, March 5.)*

### Phantom Lady

This 1944 film noir, directed by Robert Siodmak, is one of the darkest and grimmest of them all. It's the story of a lonely engineer (Alan Curtis) who takes a stranger (Fay Helm) to a tawdry Broadway stage show and returns home to find his estranged wife murdered, himself accused, and his alibi, his companion, untraceable. Siodmak captures a raw, cynical Manhattan burdened by the grind of survival. The grifters and nighthawks who give it tang, such as a randy jazz drummer (Elisha Cook, Jr.) and a gimcrack detective (Regis Toomey), are as caring and reliable as hyenas. The criminal-justice system comes off as a money jungle, the streets are bleary with the haze of alcohol, and the only gleam of hope comes from a stylish young secretary (Ella Raines) who, in the grip of a frustrated crush, takes charge of the investigation. Whatever happy twist the plot may hold in reserve, the pawings and gropings that she endures and the casual mayhem that she witnesses run through to the end, unchecked and unredeemed.—*R.B. (Film Forum, March 5-9, and streaming.)*

### Saboteur

For his first thriller set in America, from 1942, Alfred Hitchcock runs loopily through a gamut of genres and settings that depict a country living in the image of its movies. His set pieces take on the blue-collar drama, the Western, the high-society mystery, the urban police story, and the circus melodrama, and capture the paranoia of a nation newly at war. The plot concerns a worker in a munitions plant (Robert Cummings) who is wrongly suspected of sabotage and goes on the run to find the real perpetrator. In a classic twist of Hitchcockian moralism, his troubles are sparked by an ill-timed leer at a female colleague. Soldiers on patrol behind cafeteria workers, fascist terrorists lurking in towns and cities, and the chilling crackle of radio warnings set a tone of ambient menace. The final scene, atop the Statue of Liberty, involves nightmarish horror, which Hitchcock leavens with a comically surreal triviality: at a time of war, life hangs, more than ever, by a thread.—*R.B. (Film Forum, March 7 and March 9, and streaming.)*

## DANCE

### Kimberly Bartosik/daela
### New York Live Arts

How did we get here? How did we lose direction? The anxiety behind such now quotidian questions charges the atmosphere of "Through the Mirror of Their Eyes." In Bartosik's fifty-minute piece, which extends some of the violence and the emotion of her 2018 work "I hunger for you," three distinctive dancers—Joanna Kotze, Dylan Crossman, and Burr Johnson—move wildly, running and leaping as if trying to get past the bewildering present. But they aren't alone. Three children—including Bartosik's daughter, Dahlia—are watching, and slowly they join, with their own sense of which way to go.—*Brian Seibert (March 4-7.)*

### Nederlands Dans Theatre
### City Center

This troupe, based in The Hague, is one of the most prestigious contemporary-dance ensembles in Europe, if not the world. Its reputation is rooted, in part, in the long artistic residency of the choreographer Jiří Kylián, whose particular brand of dance theatre has had a profound impact on the European dance scene. The current program doesn't include any Kylián, but the four choreographers on it are in many ways his heirs. Gabriela Carrizo, from Argentina, has created a fragmented Bergmanesque narrative, "The Missing Door," revolving around a death and set in a bleak, hotel-like space. "Walk the Demon" is one of Marco Goecke's twitchy, insect-like essays in movement. And, from the two in-house choreographers, Sol

SPRING PREVIEW

# Flamenco Season, a New Work by Mark Morris

March is flamenco season in New York, thanks to the annual **Flamenco Festival** (March 12-April 5, at various venues), which brings all that's new and old in this Spanish art dating back centuries. The offerings in this year's twentieth-anniversary edition are particularly wide-ranging, from the highly produced "An Ode to Time," by the superstar bailaora **María Pagés** (at City Center, March 28-29), to the experimental and anarchic-feeling "Fla.co.men" (Skirball, March 13), by the flamenco surrealist **Israel Galván.** (Take snacks to the Galván show, which is almost two hours long, with no intermission.) Two of the more personal offerings come from **Rocío Molina,** an innovator who indulges her fierce imagination and sense of humor in "Caída del Cielo" (City Center, March 27), and **Manuel Liñán,** whose show "¡Viva!" is a joyously openhearted exploration of the expressive potential of flamenco in drag (City Center, April 3).

**Jamar Roberts,** who was appointed choreographer-in-residence of the Alvin Ailey troupe last year, will make his first piece for **New York City Ballet,** to be revealed on May 7 in the company's spring season (at the David H. Koch, April 21-May 31). It will be intriguing to see, for the first time, how Roberts translates his quietly incisive aesthetic to the idiom of ballet. Interestingly, he's not using jazz this time—earlier pieces were set to Coltrane and Don Pullen—but, rather, the ambient music of Kyle Preston, which Roberts describes as "minimalist in instrumentation but maximal in tension and emotion." On April 24, **Pam Tanowitz,** a choreographer who specializes in dissecting the internal logic of ballet, will unveil her second piece for the company.

The **Mark Morris Dance Group** presents an intimate evening at its Brooklyn headquarters that includes the New York première of a new work by Morris, "Arrows. Eros." (Mark Morris Dance Center, April 15-19). The sextet is set to two short cantatas for soprano and mezzo by George Frideric Handel, a composer who has inspired Morris to great heights in the past. The music, performed live, is reason enough to show up, as are Morris's exceptional, down-to-earth dancers.

Reggie Wilson's collagelike pieces gather fragments of stories, mythologies, songs, and dances related to African-American history and expression. In "POWER," his latest work for his company, **Reggie Wilson / Fist and Heel Performance Group** (BAM's Harvey Theatre, April 29-May 2), he explores the movement language of the black Shakers, a little-discussed branch of the utopian eighteenth-century religious movement.

—*Marina Harss*

León and Paul Lightfoot, we get "Shut Eye," a fantasy made of light and shadow.—*Marina Harss (March 4-7.)*

### Amanda Selwyn
Baruch Performing Arts Center

Selwyn has managed to produce sincere, personal works year after year for two decades—no small feat. Her choreography tends toward emotional directness and fluidity and is often developed through a collaborative process with the dancers of her company, Amanda Selwyn Dance Theatre. Her newest work, "Hindsight," deals with the emotional impact of memory on the human psyche and includes motifs drawn from the repertory she has built during the past twenty years.—*M.H. (March 5-7.)*

### Oona Doherty
92nd Street Y

This fast-rising Northern Irish choreographer starts her performances for the 92nd Street Y's Harkness Dance Festival at street level, emerging from the back of a car, already strutting. The solo she performs upstairs in the theatre, an excerpt from "Hard to Be Soft," retains much of that swagger. Her stage presence is tough and electric, her face as expressive as an actor's. To a soundtrack of angry voices from a documentary about Belfast youth, she samples the sneering, crotch-grabbing posturing of a working-class male, masking vulnerability with aggression. At the same time, there's heavenly choir music playing, and Doherty stretches toward the sublime.—*B.S. (March 6-7.)*

### "Fruits Borne Out of Rust"
Japan Society

In this multimedia work, the Japanese visual artist Tabaimo looks for a bright side to aging and decay. The piece is a sort of surreal day in the life, set to a cheery live pop score. Tabaimo's whimsical animation (reminiscent of Terry Gilliam's Monty Python work) is projected behind and over the body of the dancer Chiharu Mamiya, placing her in a domestic scene, and then suddenly in a giant birdcage. The agitated, non-sequitur choreography is by Maki Morishita; beneath all the whimsy is a quiet desperation.—*B.S. (March 6-7.)*

### Nacera Belaza & Meryem Jazouli
Danspace Project

As part of Danspace Project's "Platform 2020: Utterances from the Chorus," two choreographers steeped in North African dance and song share a program. Jazouli, based in Casablanca, presents "Folkah!," an examination of guedra, a folk dance of southern Moroccan women in which a semicircle of clapping, ululating singers support a soloist on her knees. Belaza, born in Algeria and based in France, offers "La Procession," leading the audience through St. Mark's Church on a journey that pauses before darkly poetic scenes and ends in spinning.—*B.S. (March 9-10.)*

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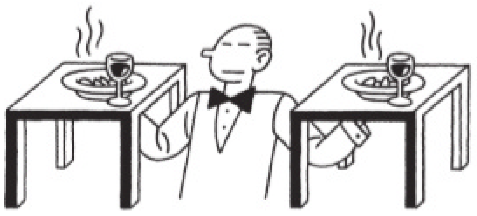

## TABLES FOR TWO

### Lekka Burger

81 Warren St.

There has never been a better time to eat a meatless hamburger. The current surge of interest in plant-based diets has sparked an arms race of sorts. Companies such as Impossible Burger and Beyond Meat are using cutting-edge technology to make ground-beef facsimiles that look, feel, and even smell eerily similar to the real thing; you can find their products everywhere from small restaurants to national fast-food chains and supermarkets. Meanwhile, in New York, a number of creative chefs have put serious effort into improving upon the archetype, using actual vegetables.

Since 2008, the chef Amanda Cohen has been the force behind Dirt Candy, the first vegetarian restaurant to hold its own in New York's fine-dining landscape. Cohen had never served a veggie burger before Andrea Kerzner, a South African philanthropist looking for ways to fight climate change, cold-called her to propose that they collaborate on a restaurant built around one, but she was game to try. Last November, they opened Lekka Burger, in Tribeca.

Kerzner, a longtime vegan, has said that she wanted the eponymous burger—*lekka* is Afrikaans slang for "awesome"—to taste like "something made in a kitchen, not a lab." What Cohen achieved is a technical marvel: a perfectly puck-shaped patty, made primarily of portobello mushroom, cannellini beans, and a hint of chili, plus a secret binding agent that holds everything together, even when topped with a vegan cheese sauce (butter beans, coconut oil). The charred exterior is crisp and craggy. The interior has a pink hue that recalls medium-rare ground chuck. The flavor is deeply smoky but unmistakably vegetal.

It's the best kitchen-made veggie burger the city has seen since Brooks Headley, a former pastry chef at Del Posto, opened Superiority Burger, in the East Village. Headley's patty, which contains roasted carrots, chickpeas, red quinoa, and crushed walnuts, among other ingredients, is much smaller and squishier, its effect more wholesome and retro, its following fervent. Yet, in "The Superiority Burger Cookbook," Headley explains that the restaurant's name is "a bit of a red herring." "Sure, the majority of our business is selling vegetarian hamburgers," he writes, "but you can cobble together a very nice meal here and avoid the burger altogether."

The same cannot be said of Lekka, which offers five iterations of its burger—with globally themed toppings such as papadum and curry-tamarind ketchup, or guacamole and Hatch-chili sauce—and three salads, only one of which, the cauliflower Waldorf, I'd consider ordering again. And this is the main reason I find Lekka disappointing: in this golden age of vegetable-centric cooking, focussing on a meatless dish crafted in the image of a meaty one strikes me as increasingly misguided.

Lekka mimics Shake Shack, down to the efficient counter service, the very good crinkle-cut fries, and the shakes (made with excellent oat-milk soft serve). The cheerful, colorful branding feels slick and corporate, millennial-targeted and franchise-ready (Kerzner hopes to open more locations in New York), with a Ms. Pac-Man machine by the bathroom and potted succulents affixed to tabletops. There's even a full bar.

But why uphold the very paradigm you're trying to overturn? A meal at Lekka only left me with a craving for a beef burger. I see much more potential for fast-food revolution in "a very nice meal" at Superiority Burger, where the burger is, as Headley seems to acknowledge, the least interesting thing on the menu. Give me sandwiches stuffed with stretchy sheets of tofu skin, also known as yuba; salads of charred broccoli and candied cashews or tart beets sprinkled with sesame seeds and fried pretzels; a scoop of startlingly refreshing mandarin sorbet. A very nice meal at Superiority Burger is a glimpse into how genuinely sustaining a world with fewer burgers—meatless or otherwise—could be. *(Lekka burgers, $9.95-$11.95.)*

—*Hannah Goldfield*

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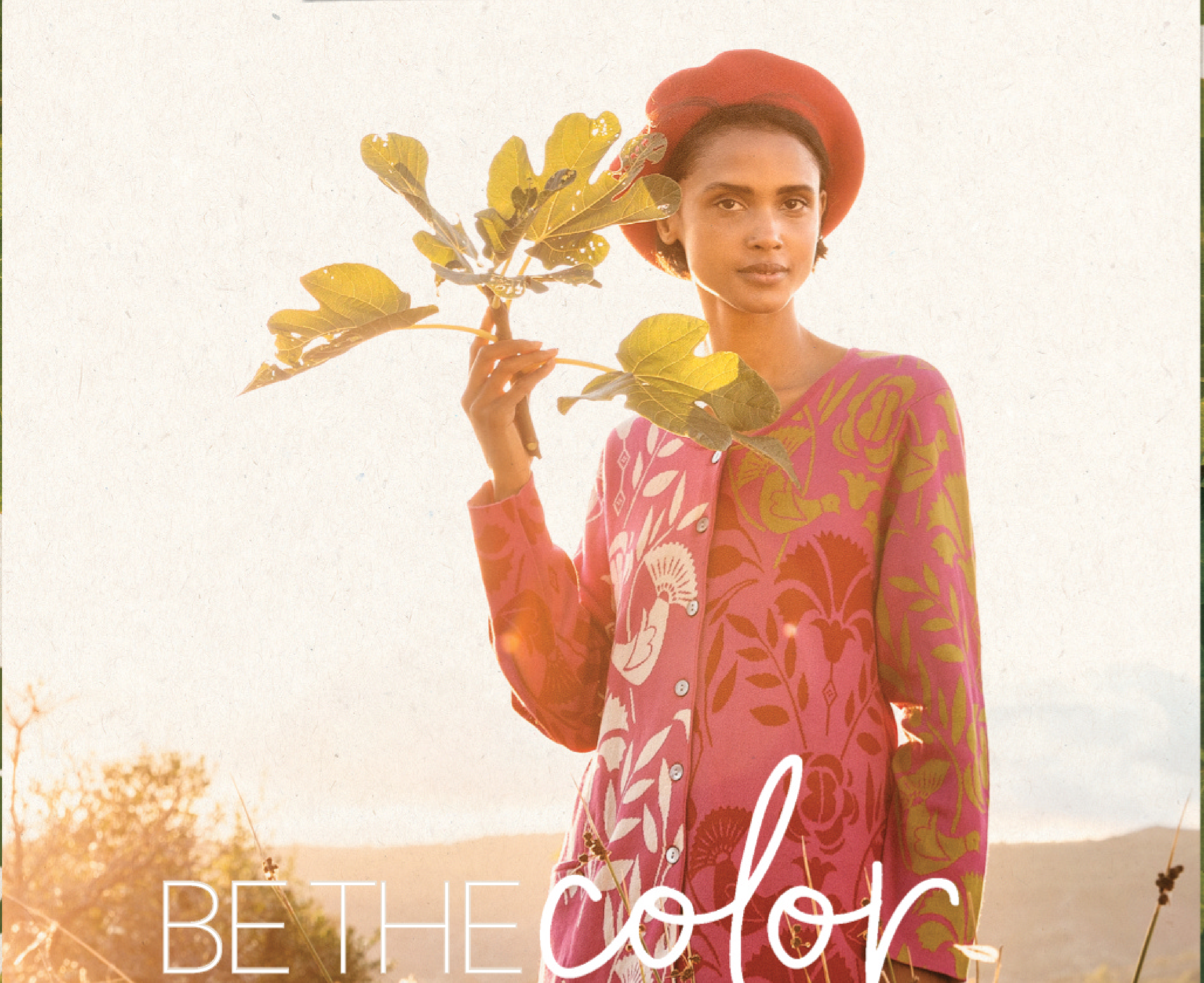
Swedish design with a green soul



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THE NEW YORKER

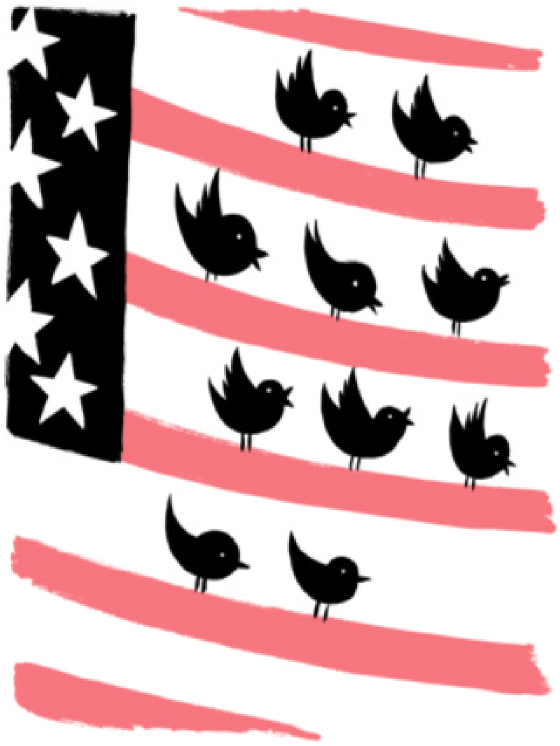
# THE TALK OF THE TOWN

## COMMENT
### PEOPLE MACHINES

"Stay out of American elections," Bernie Sanders warned Vladimir Putin, after U.S. intelligence officials informed him that the Russians are meddling in the Democratic Presidential primaries on his behalf. They're still shilling for Donald Trump, too, setting up fake social-media accounts and spreading fake news, which apparently bothers the President no more now than it did the last time around. But it is difficult to defend the integrity of American elections against foreign interference when Americans have come to accept so much domestic interference. Michael Bloomberg is attempting to buy his way to the Presidency and, while plenty of people have complained about it—"That is called oligarchy, not democracy," Sanders said—no one has done anything about it, and it was the Democratic National Committee, not the Internet Research Agency, that made it possible for Bloomberg to purchase a place in the debates.

Before 2015, when Fox News put Trump at the center of its debate stage, and asked him the lion's share of the questions, polls had never been used to determine which major-party candidates would be allowed to participate in a televised debate, or where they would stand, or how many questions they would get. Reputable polling organizations, including Pew and Gallup, did not participate in this charade; pollsters at Bloomberg Politics were among those who complied. Four years later, notwithstanding how badly this worked out for Republicans, the D.N.C. decided to use the same method, a decision that doomed the slow-starting campaigns of the likes of Michael Bennet and Julián Castro. If the method narrowed the field, it did not improve the calibre of the candidates. And almost no one blinked an eye.

Nearly every major polling outfit miscalled the 2016 Presidential race. Most did a lot better at predicting the 2018 midterms. Still, a majority of Americans don't trust polls. Polls measure something, but it's often the wrong thing (fame, money). They're like S.A.T. scores. The problem isn't really their accuracy; it's the damage they do. When modern polling began, in the nineteen-thirties, George Gallup claimed that it rekindled the tradition of the town meeting, but most members of Congress considered it to be, as one wrote, "in contradiction to representative government." In 1949, the political scientist Lindsay Rogers complained that "pollsters have dismissed as irrelevant the kind of political society in which we live and which we, as citizens, should endeavor to strengthen." Democracy requires participation, deliberation, representation, and leadership—the actual things, not their simulation.



Tweeting is to talking what polling is to voting. Twitter was launched in 2006. Straightaway, people began using it to wage political campaigns. Barack Obama's 2008 campaign used it to raise money. Conservatives used it to undermine the press. "Using Twitter to bypass traditional media and directly reach voters is definitely a good thing," Newt Gingrich said, in 2009. A lot of people thought, and still do, earnestly, that Twitter is good for democracy. "Twitter is one of the places where you actually have your own soapbox," a user said, in 2011. Twitter dubbed the 2012 race "The Twitter Election," and, two years later, published "The Twitter Government and Elections Handbook," which described Twitter as "a real-time measure of public opinion." Just as Gallup had done decades earlier, Twitter advertised its platform to politicians as "The Town Hall Meeting . . . In Your Pocket."

All this happened even as a growing body of empirical research demonstrated that the more politically charged the tweet, the more likely it is to reach a large audience, that people who get political information from Twitter are radicalized by the experience, and that Twitter, like Facebook, serves as an excellent medium for propaganda. So wholly did the tiny world of Twitter seem to *be* the world that, in 2017, the Supreme Court ruled,

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

in Packingham v. North Carolina, that social media is a public sphere, a decision that rested on the Court's belief in its ubiquity. "Everybody uses Twitter," Justice Elena Kagan said. In fact, only about one in five Americans has used it. Most people who have a Twitter account rarely use it, and very few of those who do post about politics. The ones who do, post a lot—sometimes even as much as the President—and they're atypical in other ways, too. A study from a decade ago found that the average political tweeter is "a white male in his 30s or 40s who has moderate-to-high household income and considers himself to be a political junkie." The Twitterati have become more diverse in the years since; Black Lives Matter and MeToo arose on the platform. Still, it remains a very poor proxy for the electorate. In 2018, according to the Pew Research Center, ninety-seven per cent of all tweets posted by American adults about national politics were posted by ten per cent of tweeters. A disproportionate number of the people in Twitter's town hall are the sorts of people who were eligible to vote in 1820, before the first, Jackson-era expansion of the electorate: the wealthy, the educated, and the hyperpartisan. Twitter isn't the future of American democracy; it's the past.

A simulation of democracy taking the place of the real thing has been a long time coming. It began, arguably, during the 1960 Presidential election, when John F. Kennedy's campaign hired a pioneering predictive-analytics company, called the Simulmatics Corporation, to provide advice on how a Democrat could win back the White House, using an invention that it called a People Machine. Simulmatics aggregated polls (not unlike the way that FiveThirtyEight aggregates polls), divided the electorate into four hundred and eighty voter types, came up with an algorithm to model their voting behavior, and then conducted a simulation of the election (quite similar to that conducted by the Washington *Post's* new Simulator). The firm advised Kennedy to speak forthrightly about his Catholicism, and, after he won, Simulmatics took credit, which led to reports that the President-elect had relied on "a secretly designed robot campaign strategist nicknamed a 'people-machine.'" Had he cheated? Should that kind of thing be illegal? People asked those questions, but then, after a while, no one blinked an eye.

"Some critics say this is dehumanizing," a Simulmatics executive admitted. But, he asked, "Why should politicians operate in the dark? If there are *two* People Machines working against each other in a political campaign—that would be progress." Everyone's got a people machine, lately. You've probably got one in your pocket. It is not progress.

*—Jill Lepore*

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## END IS NEAR DEPT.
## POINTILLISM

COVID-19. Should we freak out or stop freaking out? Is this the big one, a prelude to the big one, or just another one? A devastating plague or a souped-up cold or something in between? On Friday morning, two hours before the stock market opened and resumed its plunge, amid deepening fears of a global pandemic, W. Ian Lipkin, one of the world's leading infectious-disease epidemiologists, sat in his living room, on the Upper West Side, preparing to head back into the fray. He was dressed for TV—he'd been making the rounds. "I never turn down Fox," he said. "It's an opportunity to preach in the wilderness."

Lipkin, who is sixty-seven, directs the Center for Infection and Immunity, at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, where attempts to develop a better diagnostic test for COVID-19 are under way. (Lab technicians have been using genetic samples, rather than the live virus, out of caution.) In January, Lipkin travelled to China to investigate the outbreak. On his return, he self-quarantined for fourteen days at the university's request, mainly in the basement of his house (his wife left him meals at the top of the stairs), before returning to his lab. That was two weeks, more than ten thousand cases, and four thousand points on the Dow ago.

Lipkin, who was the scientific consultant for the well-regarded we're-all-gonna-die film "Contagion," moved to the city in 2000, after discovering the connection between encephalitis and the spread of West Nile virus in New York. Then came 9/11, the anthrax scare, and the creation of a national network of so-called biodefense centers. Lipkin ran the one in New York. In 2003, he went to China to help advise the government on its response to SARS, an earlier coronavirus, and since then he has travelled there every year, as part of an effort to share information and cultivate coöperation. He first heard about COVID-19 from a colleague in Guangzhou, a month before the rest of the world became aware of it. "He told me, 'There's some weird thing going on in Wuhan,'" Lipkin said. "On December 31st, researchers there identified it as a coronavirus but said, 'It's not highly transmissible.' So much for that assessment!" He went on, "It's going to be difficult to know who knew what when."

Lipkin was more concerned with the virus itself: how widely it has spread, why some people get it and others don't, how to counteract it. "The trick with all this is, it's an arms race," he said. "The virus is evading you. You want to make sure you keep up with it." He added that he was "cautiously optimistic" that citizens and governments will now be more careful, and that we can accelerate the development of drugs and a vaccine. Still, he said, "things are going to get shut down. And this virus is probably going to be with us for some time to come. It might become endemic, like measles."

He is reticent, at least for the record, about the Trump Administration's handling of the crisis, the wisdom of staging the Olympics in Japan, and the panic seizing global equity markets. He said that he has consulting gigs with several corporations, and talks regularly with chief executives: "I've gotten a lot of calls. A lot of them really just want to protect their employees and customers. There's the other kind, too, who want me to call them fifteen minutes before, say, the federal government announces that it's going to shut down all the bridges and tunnels in and out of Manhattan."

It has been determined that the virus is present in human feces. In Asia, Lipkin noted, the plumbing in many kitchens and bathrooms does not include a U-trap—the bend in a pipe that fills with standing water, which in turn blocks polluted air from rising from the sewers. "How long is it in feces?" he asked. "How long is it in the mouth and the nose? How long is it on surfaces? On buckles, seat belts, doorknobs, touch screens, or the TV remote in a hotel room, which, by the way, never gets cleaned and is one of the filthiest things on the planet."

Though not a germaphobe by nature, he'd been converted by the job. At 9 A.M., he set out for work wearing a pair of light-brown gloves. "I call them subway condoms," he said. "I use gloves everywhere. I don't touch my face. If I see someone coughing or sneezing, I keep my distance. On airplanes, I wipe everything down. I stay away from bowls of mixed nuts or candy." He told a story of visiting a temple in Bhubaneswar, India, and having a monkey jump on his back and stick a finger in his mouth: "Twenty-four hours later, rip-roaring diarrhea."

On Central Park West, he pointed out a painted railing and said, "That, I wouldn't worry about. You've got ultraviolet light, wind." But on the C train he wrapped an elbow around a pole and said, "I look at the world differently than you do. I see surfaces in a pointillistic fashion." When he arrived at the Mailman building, on 168th Street, he used a knuckle to press a button in the elevator and then put his gloves back on to open his office door. In eleven minutes, he had a meeting with two people who had identified themselves only as "members of U.S. intelligence." "I don't know why they want to talk to me, but they do," he said. In farewell, he gave his guest an N95 mask and a pair of rubber gloves, and offered up a forearm for a firm Roman handshake.

—*Nick Paumgarten*

### L.A. POSTCARD

## HYPE THE VOTE

Not long before Super Tuesday, a couple of hundred media, technology, and civic-engagement types gathered at a West Hollywood hotel to discuss how to get more youths and people of color to vote. "It's nonpartisan," Scott Mills, the president of Black Entertainment Television, which had organized the day of panels, said. He stood on a blue carpet in front of a blue-lit conference room strewn with blue pillows. Agitated, he called an aide over and asked, "How did we get all the blue?"

"The two parties," the aide said, sheepish. "I hadn't thought about that."

The event, called META 2020, was timed to coincide with the N.A.A.C.P. Image Awards, but the primaries were on everyone's mind. "There's so much activity designed to inhibit—I won't use the word 'suppress'—African-American participation in this election," Mills said. "We think it's important, now that we have no candidates of color, to say, 'It's critical that we all participate in this process.'"

It's a sentiment that goes down like a shot of vinegar. "I am borderline apathetic," Angela Rye, the C.E.O. of Impact Strategies, a political-advocacy firm, told Janai S. Nelson, of the N.A.A.C.P.'s legal-defense fund.

"Mmm," Nelson said. "We have to work on that."

"I've heard people say, 'I can't vote for the lesser of evils,'" an actor named Dondré Whitfield said. "I say, 'Yes, you can. Yes, you better.'" He added, "We're in the midst of this cancel culture: 'This person is gay, this person didn't fight in the military, this person called a black person an epithet in 1986. Anything I find that gives me a reason to cancel—done.' That's how we got here."

Onstage, Kamala Harris offered advice on combatting misinformation from Russian bots and "the Liar-in-Chief." "Use your voices to remind people about trusted sources of information, like BET," she said. "Point out, 'That's a lie.'"

There were texts to action. "Pull out your phone," Tiffany Dena Loftin, the director of the N.A.A.C.P.'s youth-and-college division, said. "Think of a person in your contact list" who is unlikely to vote "and send them a text." First text: "Hey." Second: "Do you know who you're voting for in November?" Third: "I actually just checked to make sure I was registered, at vote.org. You should, too."

"It's an opening, it's a question, and then it's an action," Loftin went on. "Sometimes we get stuck in thinking our posts on social media will do

### SKETCHPAD

## BUH-BYE, BAGS!

*On Sunday, New York's ban on single-use plastic bags went into effect. Before saying farewell, we revisited a few iconic archetypes of the form.*

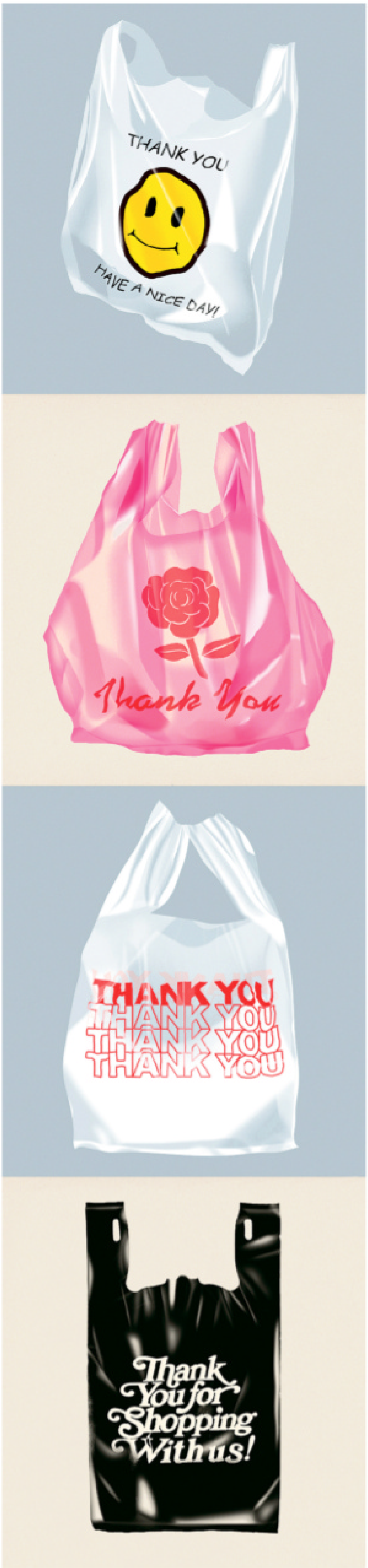


ILLUSTRATION BY NA KIM

enough. But that's not what's going to help us win in November."

Tiyale Hayes, BET's senior vice-president of consumer insights, showed pie charts with sobering statistics: twenty-one per cent of black men surveyed in February said that they were excited about a candidate; forty per cent said that they were satisfied but not excited. "If I were another country with a bunch of bots, I'd be trying to attack these people right here," he said.

Another panel addressed how to get more black men to the polls. "You can't just expect us to show up on your behalf," the rapper Clifford Harris, Jr., who goes by T.I., said. "We've already, in unison, said Bloomberg ain't it. I don't care how much money you throw around."

"We don't need all the money in the world, but it does take resources," Andrew Gillum, the former mayor of Tallahassee, who narrowly lost Florida's 2018 gubernatorial race, said. "Do you know how much money we spent trying to get old white people to vote for us? And I don't say 'old white people' as a pejorative—older white people are, in my state, consistent voters." He continued, "They get mail pieces several times a week."

T.I. screwed up his face. "What's a *mail piece*?"

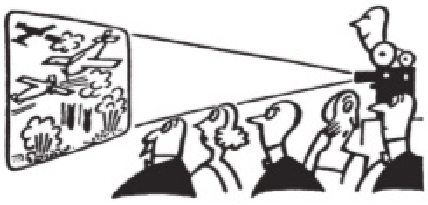
Over drinks, attendees weighed their options. "I think it's Elizabeth"—Warren—Zip Gould, the founder of Gaia Green Earth, an energy-tech firm, said. "Everything's been so patriarchal on this planet for the past six thousand years."

"I've been a Bernie Sanders hater for about four years, but I'm really warming up to him right now," Quentin James, the founder of the Collective PAC, which supports African-American candidates, said. He wore a beige porkpie hat. "But, ultimately, the person who I think could help us win elections most is Michael Bloomberg. None of this shit is possible without winning the Senate, and, to win the Senate, you gotta win fucking states like North Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas. You need a ton of fucking money to do it. It's Bloomberg who has it. That's a conundrum for our community. Yeah, I hear the stop-and-frisk shit, I get it. This is about power."

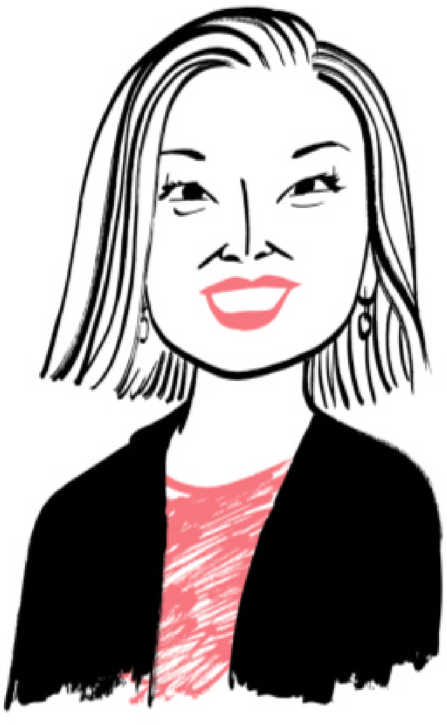
Which candidate was T.I., who had on a large diamond pendant, rooting for? "Bernie," he said. "He's not as snazzy and cool. He don't have, like, quick one-liner punch lines, but if you look at his history, where he started in politics, from marching for civil rights, I think if you care about being fair and decent, and being represented by a fair and decent human being, then I think Bernie's the best candidate. Now, if you don't give a fuck about that and you just want to get to the money . . ." He shrugged. "O.K., cool."

—*Sheila Marikar*

## THE PICTURES
## LADY FROM SHANGHAI



Cathy Yan, the director of "Birds of Prey," the new DC Comics movie, starring Margot Robbie as the anarchic antiheroine Harley Quinn, became a big-studio filmmaker the same way that Hemingway describes going bankrupt: gradually, then suddenly. In 2018, shortly after going to Sundance with her first feature, "Dead Pigs," a satirical look at a rapidly modernizing Shanghai, she landed a meeting with Warner Bros. "I put together a sizzle reel," Yan recalled the other day, sipping a matcha oat-milk latte in a coffee shop near her apartment, in SoHo. "But it was not your typical sizzle reel." To a homemade remix of "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend," Yan set a collage of clips that embodied the worst of modern womanhood: "Like, scenes from 'Bachelor' proposals, the De Beers diamond commercial, Kim Kardashian's vampire facial, Fox anchors talking about women, Trump saying 'Grab 'em by the pussy' "—stuff that might make a girl want to smash the patriarchy. "After I showed the video, there was just silence."



*Cathy Yan*

At thirty-three, Yan is the second woman to solo-direct a modern superhero film, after "Wonder Woman"'s Patty Jenkins. The theme of "Birds" is female revenge, its style an explosion of glam and grunge. Harley, who has been dumped by her boyfriend, the Joker, goes on a rampage around Gotham in short shorts, a rainbow tinsel jacket, and Gwen Stefani pigtails; her weapon of choice is a paintball gun with the force of an AK-47—annihilation by glitter bomb.

Yan's look is more professional. With her honey-blond bob, tortoiseshell earrings, and navy coat, she could pass for a consultant, a job that she briefly considered when she was an undergrad at Princeton. "Everyone was doing it," she explained. (Remember, kids: friends don't let friends apply to McKinsey.) "I remember my case interview. I was, like, 'I don't care how many Ping-Pong balls are in the vending machine.' " Instead, she went to work at the *Wall Street Journal* and eventually landed a position reporting in Hong Kong. Improbably, the *Journal* may be responsible for her film career. "Digital was just starting, and they literally shoved a video camera in my hand and said, 'You're young, shoot something,' " Yan said.

Stepping out into a cold rain, she strolled toward Chrystie Street. "I'm a global wanderer," she said—she was born in China, grew up in Virginia, and went to high school in Hong Kong—"but New York is my home." She based her Gotham on the city of the eighties, a burg with grit and heart: "I'm sick of seeing post-apocalyptic visions of Gotham, where everyone's homeless and being all sad." On Grand Street, she stopped to join a crowd gathered on a handball court. An amplified voice addressed the group in Mandarin. "Oh yeah, I forgot, happy Chinese New Year," Yan said. "I always feel so bad, because it's hard to celebrate it in America, and there are so many freaking days of it."

She approached a stand selling Chinese-style beef jerky, produced in Queens. One of the venders, dressed in an embroidered red jacket and a crown, with a phony Confucian beard—Caishen, the

Chinese god of wealth—announced, "Trump said, 'American-made.' We back him up!"

She exchanged holiday salutations with the man. "What I just said there literally means 'Hope that you can make more money.' The Chinese love money, it's just a matter of fact."

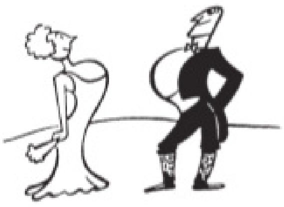
Yan spent her early childhood with her grandparents in Shanghai. Her father had been granted a visa to study sociology in the United States, a rarity in pre-Tiananmen China, and left before Yan was born. Her mother followed two years later. Yan didn't make the move until she was four. "I met my parents at the airport," she said. Her next project, for A24, is an adaptation of "Sour Heart," Jenny Zhang's 2017 book of stories about Chinese immigrants growing up in New York.

Yan has a lot of family in China, and she visits often. "I spent a fair amount of time in Beijing," she said. "It was the big, happening place. I was there for the Olympics. There were these really cheesy bars we would go to. I had a favorite night club called Chocolate that felt like it was run by the Russian mob. It was very free, if that makes any sense."

Outside Wu's Wonton King, Yan struggled to light some sparklers she had just bought. An elderly passerby stopped to cup his hands around Yan's, shielding the flame from the elements. "He says it's raining and it's windy," Yan said, when he'd left. "There's a metaphor in here somewhere." She produced a party popper from a bag and began to twist. Tiny hundred-dollar bills shot into the air. Yan squealed and took a photo. Then she headed off, shedding miniature Benjamins as she walked. Maybe there was a metaphor in there, too.

—*Alexandra Schwartz*

## NEW COLD WAR DEPT.
## INSIDIOUS



When the F.B.I. recently disclosed that Vladimir Putin was meddling in the American Presidential election again, Irina Kolesnikova, a principal ballerina with the St. Petersburg Ballet Theatre, was preparing to perform another bit of malevolent Russian meddling—in Tchaikovsky's balletic saga "Swan Lake," at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. In the ballet, Kolesnikova plays a pair of look-alike polar-opposite beauties. First, she is Odette, a princess cursed to remain a swan until a suitor swears his love to her. Then she is Odile, Odette's evil doppelgänger, who seduces her rival's would-be rescuer. Chaos ensues.

"I'm more like Odette," Kolesnikova said, the night before the première. She was seated at a table at the Russian Samovar, the midtown vodka-and-caviar joint that used to be the Frank Sinatra hangout Jilly's. Her pale hair was clipped back, and her angular cheekbones rested on her hands. "But I prefer to dance Odile."

If Odette is generically princess-like—"trusting, proud," Kolesnikova said—Odile is a stranger bird, whose motives (like Putin's?) are mysterious, explained Konstantin Tachkin, Kolesnikova's husband and the founder of the St. Petersburg Ballet Theatre. "She can be seductive, or she can be—I don't know this word in English," he said.

Kolesnikova picked up her phone and consulted Google Translate. "Insidious!" she said. (She speaks limited English.) Her favorite scene, she went on, is when, as Odile, she throws a bouquet in the prince's face, joyous at having deceived him into pledging his devotion to the wrong tutu. "I get satisfaction from that," she said.

A waitress came over. Tachkin never eats after 6 P.M., and he ordered a slice of Napoleon cake with ninety minutes to go. Kolesnikova, who as a rule does not eat dinner, ordered hot water with lemon. The couple is specific about their sleeping arrangements, too. The night before, they had rejected four rooms, in two hotels, before grudgingly settling on a suite at the downtown-Brooklyn Holiday Inn. The Marriott near the Brooklyn Bridge had been "let's call it . . . *not fresh*," Tachkin, a slight, blond man with a preppie haircut, said. A Hilton, he added, would have been out of the question.

BAM had been advertising Kolesnikova as "Swan Lake"'s headliner. "I have many responsibilities," she said, carefully. "When you have your name on the poster, it's very hard for my head." She was last in this country in 1998, as a student, to perform at BAM with her ballet school. That year, she joined the St. Petersburg Ballet Theatre, which Tachkin had founded after a stint in the Soviet special forces. "I was jumping with parachute. I was running through the forest," he said.

"It's not the Soviet Union now," Tachkin went on. "When the Western media says there's no freedom, that's not true. There's freedom. You can see on the television lots of programs." (Both he and his wife recalled, with puzzlement, the way the Soviet authorities, when they wanted to impose a news blackout, would broadcast "Swan Lake" on a loop.) He acknowledged that Russia did have "some problems inside, of course. But which country doesn't?" His dream, he said, is that Russia and the U.S. "become, maybe not friends, but two countries who can coöperate much, much better than now." He went on, "I do not think that the United States is our enemy. I know many American people. They are very friendly people. We are also very friendly people."

Since the birth of the couple's daughter, five years ago, Kolesnikova said, she feels very calm onstage, as if she is now free to relax. She will turn forty next month, and she has been reading books about how to prevent bodily degeneration by staying mentally fit. "All of a person's illnesses derive from their emotions," she said. "I want to continue dancing for many years. I'm working from all angles—on my body, as well as on my emotional state."

"She thinks she's more disciplined than me," Tachkin said, putting an elbow into his frosting. His wife made a face. "It's just a jacket!" he said, dabbing with a napkin.

Does he agree that Kolesnikova is more Odette than Odile?

"No," he said. "No." His wife laughed, and hid the lower half of her face in her turtleneck.

"Swan Lake" does not always end swimmingly. Sometimes the prince drowns after discovering his error. But St. Petersburg Theatre's version ends in triumph for the prince and his (correct) bride—an ending written under Stalin, according to the dance scholar Janice Ross, because his regime demanded "optimistic art." The moral, Kolesnikova said, is that, "when people love each other, they can win anything." But also, she added, perhaps the prince should have paid more attention.

—*Elizabeth Barber*

### LETTER FROM SEOUL

# COMPLETE TRASH

*Composting could get us out of the mess we’ve made.*

### BY RIVKA GALCHEN

*South Korea recycles ninety-five per cent of its food waste, a marked contrast to the dismal rate in New York City.*

Trash is new. During the nineteenth century, New York was dirty but much of its garbage consisted of leftovers and scraps and other items to reuse. Sunday’s roast became Monday’s hash; Monday’s bread became Wednesday’s bread pudding. Pigs roamed the streets, eating old lettuce and radish tops. “Swill children” went from house to house, collecting food scraps that they sold to farmers as fertilizer and animal feed. Bones became glue. Old grease was turned into tallow candles, or mixed with ashes to make soap. Disposable packaging was almost nonexistent.

In nearly every decade of the nineteenth century, the city’s population doubled. New York began to dump its excess into the Atlantic Ocean. In 1895, George Waring, a former military officer, became sanitation commissioner. “Colonel Waring’s broom . . . saved more lives than a squad of doctors,” the social reformer and journalist Jacob Riis wrote, of the man who put sanitation workers in white suits. Waring made New York households and businesses separate out food waste and ashes; he diverted horse manure for use as fertilizer. Food waste was turned into soap, grease, or compost, or carted to pig farms in New Jersey. Some of the ash became cinder blocks. Some went for expanding the footprint of Rikers Island. Three years after his appointment, Waring died, of yellow fever. His sorting program continued until the First World War, when it was abandoned because of labor and material shortages. By 1918, the city was again dumping waste into the ocean. Or depositing it in landfills.

The story of New York’s garbage hasn’t changed as much in the past century as you might imagine, given that we now have the technology to 3-D-print a baby Yoda, or to run a car on old vegetable oil. Paper and plastic are separated, but recycling of organics—food waste, yard waste, pretty much anything that rots—remains voluntary, even though such material makes up about a third of New York’s trash. All but five per cent of the city’s organic waste goes to landfills.

Organic waste doesn’t just stink when it’s sent to landfills; it becomes a climate poison. Yes, we’ve been schooled again and again in the importance of recycling—by friends, by pious enemies, even by “WALL-E.” But the recycling of organics is arguably more important than that of plastics, metal, or paper. Composting transforms raw organic waste into a humus-like substance that enriches soil and enhances carbon capture. In landfills, starved of oxygen, decomposing organics release methane, a greenhouse gas whose warming effects, in the long run, are fifty-six times those of $CO_2$. The United States has greater landfill emissions than any other country, the equivalent of thirty-seven million cars on the road each year.

Last April, the New York State legislature enacted laws requiring large businesses and institutions to recycle their food waste, but New York City is exempt

ILLUSTRATION BY GIACOMO GAMBINERI

from the new rules. In 2013, when Michael Bloomberg was in his final year as mayor of New York, he instituted an organics-recycling program, which officials said could become mandatory in a few years. Bill de Blasio, who was the public advocate at the time, supported that vision, but as mayor he has failed to fund it.

I live not far from Times Square, near a food-cart-storage facility, a family-run butcher shop, and a La Quinta hotel; one of the lower floors of my building houses a catering business. Since the sides of the street are reserved exclusively for cars, there's no room for dumpsters. Instead, each night a low wall of piled garbage bags appears, as if left by malign elves. Sometimes there are bags of kaiser rolls and tired fruit. A caramel-colored goo oozes onto the sidewalk. Walking by the trash embankment the other evening, I startled one of our neighborhood rats, which sped across the curb and down a sewer drain.

All of which I find, to be honest, totally normal.

I landed in Seoul, South Korea, on a hazy morning in early October, the day before Typhoon Mitag was expected to hit the southern coast of the Korean Peninsula. Today, South Korea recycles ninety-five per cent of its food waste, but twenty-five years ago almost nothing was recycled. In the nineteen-nineties, following the country's rapid industrialization and the movement of its people from rural areas to the cities, the trash dumps at the cities' edges overflowed. Poor families lived near the dumps; many of them picked through the garbage for plastics and metals to sell. Food scraps, an incidental petri dish for disease, made the dumps foul, sickening the garbage pickers.

"We had people lying down in the road in front of the garbage trucks to prevent more being brought to the landfills," Kim Mi-Hwa, the head of the Korea Zero Waste Movement Network, told me. "The government saw that it had to do something."

The K.Z.W.M.N.'s office is about the size of a California closet. It's on the twelfth floor of a modern office tower, the Gwanghwamun Platinum Building, down the street from shops that offer hourly rentals of *hanbok*, the bright-colored traditional garment worn for ceremonies. I arrived with Lucia Lee, my interpreter. We set our shoes among a small crowd of slippers near the door. Kim, a youthful fifty-seven-year-old woman dressed in a blue-and-white striped button-up, pulled folding wooden chairs out from under a small central table. A young woman brought the three of us ceramic mugs of buckwheat tea. The office had the efficiency of a ship's cabin.

Kim's activism dates back to the nineteen-eighties, when she studied nutrition and food culture at university. She became involved in the pro-democracy student movements, and was a leader campaigning for equal rights for women. K.Z.W.M.N. was formed, in 1997, from a network of thirty-one grassroots organizations. "Our primary work is to advocate for change in government policies, for laws," Kim said. "We also have a lot of programs aimed at educating the public." K.Z.W.M.N. was instrumental in advancing Seoul's ban on plastic bags, which went into effect at the end of 2018.

During Kim's childhood, the city that is now a landscape of high-rises and skyscrapers was largely farmland. "After the Korean War, food waste was not a problem—people were starving," she said. "We took our food scraps outside and fed them to the cows and pigs."

In 1995, South Korea replaced its flat tax for waste disposal with a new system. Recycling materials were picked up free of charge, but for all other trash the city imposed a fee, which was calculated by measuring the size and number of bags. By 2006, it was illegal to send food waste to landfills and dumps; citizens were required to separate it out. The new waste policies were supported with grants to the then nascent recycling industry. These measures have led to a decrease in food waste, per person, of about three-quarters of a pound a day—the weight of a Big Mac and fries, or a couple of grapefruits. The country estimates the economic benefit of these policies to be, over the years, in the billions of dollars.

Residents of Seoul can buy designated biodegradable bags for their food scraps, which are disposed of in automated bins, usually situated in an apartment building's parking area. The bins weigh and charge per kilogram of organic waste. At the Energy Zero House, a model apartment complex in Seoul, a slim woman wearing dark clothes demonstrated how the "smart" composting bin worked. The bin resembled an industrial washer-dryer with a cheerful teal top, and had instructions for use in both Korean and English. She waved a small card, which looked like my grocery-store points card, in front of a scanner. The lid opened in a slow, smooth, and slightly uncanny fashion. In went the waste. A weight registered in red L.E.D. Then the lid lowered, with similar robotic indifference. Nearby was a separate cannister for used cooking oil. A tidy latticed structure covered the area, like a bus stop. For a Seoul family, the cost of food-scrap recycling averages around six dollars a month.

The thirteen thousand tons of food waste produced daily in South Korea now become one of three things: compost (thirty per cent), animal feed (sixty per cent), or biofuel (ten per cent). "People from other countries ask me very often, 'How did South Korea achieve this success?'" Kim said. Sometimes it is attributed to the fancy technology that weighs and tracks the compost, and to the R.F.I.D. chips used in some municipalities to insure that households pay in proportion to the amount of waste they produce. "That is important," she told me. "But also I say the government shouldn't act directly. There needs to be an intermediary between the government and the people. Groups like us. That can explain back and forth. People don't want to hear it straight from the government." Setting up waste-processing sites was difficult, in part because there were fears that such sites would become sources of stink or disease, like the landfills. "We went door to door to talk to residents. We would bring people in for a tour of the food-waste facility. We would educate people about how it was healthy. I've been shouted at a lot," Kim said, laughing. "But things change. People are used to it now. These days, we focus on offering seminars at local centers, or wherever people gather." She added, "We have the most difficulty in wealthy neighborhoods and neighborhoods with foreigners."

My interpreter, Lucia Lee, was twenty-six years old, "but in Korean I'm twenty-seven," she said. She told me that the nine months of gestation are included in one's age. Before becoming an interpreter, Lucia had worked at a hospital reading pathology slides, a job she chose because her sister had died of cancer. She found the work discouraging: "You aren't really able to help people." She began to travel, for months at a time, which surprised her friends, because she had always been frugal, not even buying coffee when they met. Living abroad, she soon learned other languages, including English, and decided to go to school in order to work as an interpreter. "My parents come from a very conservative area outside of Seoul," she told me. "In my family they have a scholarship, but it's only for boys." By "my family," she meant an extended group of relations involving some two thousand people. She paid for her schooling herself.

On our way to meet Lee Eun-Su, the founder of the Nowon Urban Farming Network, an organization that has a hundred and thirty members, Lucia told me that she had loved reading up on composting—she wanted to make sure that she would be familiar with any specialized vocabulary. Being environmentally conscious is "popular" among young people, she said. "When I visited Taiwan, I saw drinks being served with stainless-steel straws in a restaurant." The Taiwanese government had placed limitations on the use of plastic straws. "I thought the straws were 'cool,' so I purchased one when I got back to Korea." She smiled. She said that Seoul is now also imposing limits on plastic straws. For her birthday, she bought gifts for her friends—reusable water bottles. At the end of our subway ride, she showed me where the tickets were recycled.

Lee Eun-Su, a slim, cheerful, and energetic fifty-five-year-old, told me that he "wakes up thinking about urban farming and goes to sleep to dream about urban farming." He is very much a city person. His parents moved to Seoul from the countryside when he was young. "It was the best decision they made in their lives," he said. He comes from a family of four children. His father was too ill to work, and his mother made money selling things in the street. The Nowon district, where Lee lives, is a middle-class neighborhood known for its good schools.

Lee used to work installing cable in apartment buildings. He found himself in basements and on roofs. "That was when I saw all this unused space," he said. "A waste!" He moved into a small apartment with his family, and now makes a modest living as a landlord, so that he can devote himself to promoting urban farming throughout Seoul. "It's like a university, and I get to be a professor," he said. He tapped his chest and grinned. "I was the one who proposed growing mushrooms in the basements," he added. Sunnier urban-farm spaces grow lettuces, cabbages, peppers, peas, and flowers. Many of the organics-recycling bins in Seoul have the capacity to transform waste into compost, which can then be distributed to urban farms, sometimes in the same apartment complex. In the past decade, the number of such farms in Seoul has increased from sixty-six to more than two thousand.

In a concrete high-rise bordered by a covered highway, we headed into the basement by ducking beneath a staircase lined with pictures of four varieties of mushroom. Each fungus looked spookier than the next: the shiitake, the golden oyster, the deer horn, the lion's mane.

Gathered in the basement were members of the building's Urban Farming Committee. They were mostly older women, faces brightened with lipstick. They led us around their projects, small rooms lit by bluish lights. Cylinders of gauze-wrapped compost sat on metal racks; from the cylinders emerged what looked like sepia alien hands: deer-horn mushrooms. The rooms were humid and cool, and smelled like loam. A delicate tubular watering system wove throughout the metal racks. The effect was part sci-fi, part night club.

On a table in an adjacent space, a crowd of full-grown deer-horn mushrooms, potted and wrapped in cellophane, might have been cousins to Christmas poinsettias. We were each given a pot. It was the day before the Korean holiday known as Gaecheonjeol, or National Foundation Day. (The holiday commemorates the founding myth of the Korean people, which involves a bear and a tiger that both wanted to be human. Only the bear was patient enough.) One of the women explained that the mushrooms are often used to make a tea that is sometimes sweetened with dates.

Later, Lee showed us the composting system he had set up in a building where he keeps a tiny, crowded office. He has a lot of uses for compost: he has transformed the entire roof area—and a platform above it, near the cable and the water system—into a garden, where he grows marigolds, squash, mint, a date tree, and more. Lee has also made a "green curtain," a trellis of various climbing vines, above the building's parking area. Under an eave, a large barrel had been set up on a rotating metal stand, like a Foosball figure on a pole; this makes it easy to turn the compost, to aerate it. Lee unscrewed the lid of the barrel, revealing a dark mixture inside that smelled slightly of cleaning product.

In the course of weeks or months, billions of microorganisms feed on the carbon and nitrogen in the composting mixture. Dry and brown organic matter provides carbon; green matter provides nitrogen. As the microorganisms process the mixture, they need oxygen, which is usually generated by stirring. Not enough oxygen, and the compost will smell like rotten eggs; too much nitrogen, and the compost will smell like ammonia; a good ratio of elements, and the compost will simply smell like fresh earth.

Lee deposited a small bucket of food scraps into the barrel, sprinkling wood chips (for more carbon) on top. He then poured in a brown liquid from an old detergent bottle—microorganisms. He restored the lid and rotated the barrel a few times. "That's it," he said. Then we went out for bubble tea.

During a brief break, I called home. My six-year-old shouted into the phone, "So they're good at composting—come home now! And bring Pokémon souvenirs!" In my next chat across the globe, my mom said that, when she was a kid, in Tel Aviv, composting was done the old-fashioned way: people went into

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the street with buckets, gathered horse dung, and spread it in their gardens. She said that we make simple things complicated these days. She said they had bedbugs when she was a kid, too, and it wasn't a big deal; they just took care of it.

Antonio Reynoso, the chair of the sanitation committee of the New York City Council, told me, "I got my start as an environmental-justice advocate, and even I thought of composting as, like, this nice niche thing you might do in a garden." Reynoso is thirty-six. He grew up on the south side of Williamsburg, the son of immigrants from the Dominican Republic. Until recently, his neighborhood received forty per cent of the city's trash. "Trash goes to predominantly black and brown neighborhoods," he said. We were in his small office, near City Hall. On a wall hung three maps: of New York's bike paths, Brooklyn Public Library branch locations, and District Thirty-four, which Reynoso represents. Reynoso was first exposed to trash activism in 1998, when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani tried to put two more incinerators in his neighborhood, after the closing of the Fresh Kills landfill, on Staten Island. Hispanic activists working in alliance with the Hasidic Jewish community helped quash the plan.

In New York, a million tons of organic waste are deposited in landfills each year. "Yet trash is always on the back burner of climate activism," Reynoso said, pointing out that trash wasn't even part of the Green New Deal until July, 2019, when Representative Ilhan Omar added the Zero Waste Act. Mayor de Blasio campaigned on a program of "Zero Waste," promising to reduce landfill dumping by ninety per cent by 2030, but, in a recent press conference, seven years later, he said both that this is "an urgent, urgent goal" and that "I think what has happened here is that, you know, we have to look at the whole thing from scratch and come back with a plan that will get us there by 2030." In 2018, de Blasio neglected to fund expansion of the organics-recycling program. The 2020 budget proposed by his administration for the New York City Department of Sanitation's waste-prevention, reuse, and recycling programs was nine per cent lower than it was for 2019.

Reynoso is working to get mandatory organics recycling passed by the City Council before the end of the year. He believes that he has the support and the votes to get this done. "Some things should be worked out through public discourse, and some things are just a given," he said. "Organics is one of those things. On environmental justice, you have to be willing to spend political capital."

The city's organics-recycling program has so far diverted only a tiny fraction of waste from landfills. Curbside pickup is available for three and a half million New Yorkers, but only a small number take advantage of it. The city's sanitation commissioner, Kathryn Garcia, who grew up and lives in Park Slope, insists that there is enthusiasm for the program. "That some people will haul their food waste half a mile to a drop-off at the farmers' market tells you something about their commitment," she told me. I asked if she thought many people were aware of the connection between food waste and climate change. "Not really," she said. "Not even in Park Slope"—a famously liberal neighborhood, which has had a coöperative organic grocery store since 1973.

Mandatory organics recycling could save money. Sanitation trucks would have waste to pick up throughout the city, as opposed to gathering bits and pieces from participating households. (Organics collection currently averages between one and two tons per truck shift, a fraction of the capacity of ten to twelve tons.) There's even a small amount of money to be made from selling compost, though for now much of it is given away in the interest of generating enthusiasm and awareness. And the amount of waste that New York sends to landfills—some of which are as far away as South Carolina, all of which are in poor areas—would be reduced.

The D.S.N.Y. spent four hundred and twenty-two million dollars last year to send trash to landfills—about a third of its budget. Making organics recycling mandatory was estimated in a 2016 report by the Citizens Budget Commission, a fiscally conservative think tank, to cost somewhere between a hundred and seventy-seven million and two hundred and fifty-one million dollars a year. City Hall had no counter-estimate to offer, but those figures include the onetime costs of updating trucks. "Climate justice is not cheap," Reynoso said. But, he added, "it is the right thing to do." The city's current contracts with composting and biogas facilities can handle a modest two hundred and fifty tons a day. However, Reynoso said, "we could pass mandatory organics recycling and make the goes-into-effect date be tomorrow."

New Yorkers would need to learn a bit, too. Councilman Reynoso's district participates in the voluntary organics-recycling program, as does mine. About a third of New Yorkers can sign up to have their organic waste collected from their homes, in brown bins, but many people are unaware of the program. Even in participating districts, only about ten per cent of organic matter is diverted from landfills. I asked a middle-aged man listening to music if he knew what a brown bin nearby was for. "Bones?"

One of Reynoso's priorities is a Save-As-You-Throw program, similar to the one in Seoul. (Initially, it was called Pay-As-You-Throw.) The proposal, which Commissioner Garcia is supportive of, would make pickup of all recycling—including organics—free, while charging for regular trash, beyond a fixed limit, by the bag. A similar model has worked well in other American cities. San Francisco launched mandatory organics recycling in 2009, and now diverts eighty per cent of food waste; a comparable model in Seattle has led to about sixty per cent of total waste being recycled. New York's housing stock is distinct from that of those cities—it's arguably easier to enforce mandatory recycling for single-family homes and smaller buildings—but it isn't that different from Seoul's.

Fresh Kills, on Staten Island, used to house a landfill composed of more than two thousand acres; now it is a site for recycling, with a large section devoted to composting yard and food waste. On a January day, the scent of Christmas filled the air—it was the first day of grinding up the season's trees, which, after the strings of lights were manually removed, would become compost. That compost would eventually be spread in the city's parks, distributed through giveaways, and purchased by landscapers for fourteen dollars per cubic yard. "We process the trees differently, because the needles are so acidic; that's why you never see anything growing at the base of a pine tree," Mike LeBlanc told me. LeBlanc is a facilities manager for Denali Water Solutions, which runs the site. Organic waste was arranged in nine windrows—long, wide strips that resemble burial mounds—which are monitored for levels of carbon and nitrogen, and also for temperature. Microorganisms generate heat, which speeds the transformation from waste to the "black gold" of suitable compost. At about a hundred and sixty degrees, harmful bacteria and weed seeds are destroyed.

"Right now, it's a four-to-five-month process," Scott Morrell, the operation manager, explained. Interspersed among the windrows were truck-size machines that looked like toys: a bright-orange Doppstadt Inventhor ground up trees, an emerald-green Komptech Multistar sorted waste by size, and a white-and-yellow SCARAB turned and aerated the windrows with its inner spokes. Pointing to a thin brick tower in the distance, LeBlanc said, "We use that smokestack off the Con Ed plant to see which way the wind is blowing, because we try not to turn the piles when it's going to send the smell inland." Even a perfectly maintained compost pile starts out as many buckets of organic waste.

The only food waste handled at the Fresh Kills site comes from Staten Island itself—the borough, having been the city's principal landfill for more than forty years, has had enough of taking waste from the rest of the city. Seagulls, starlings, and sparrows crowded the windrows, which are full of nourishment. "Let's show you the Tiger," LeBlanc said, turning away from the windrows and toward a huge white canopy, several stories high. Inside was the Tiger Depack—a royal-blue machine with a white tiger painted on the side. It's the size of a dumpster, but louder and prettier, with a price tag of about a million dollars. Through a centrifuge, the machine separates waste from the bags that it comes in. The bags and food wrappers, which are less dense than the

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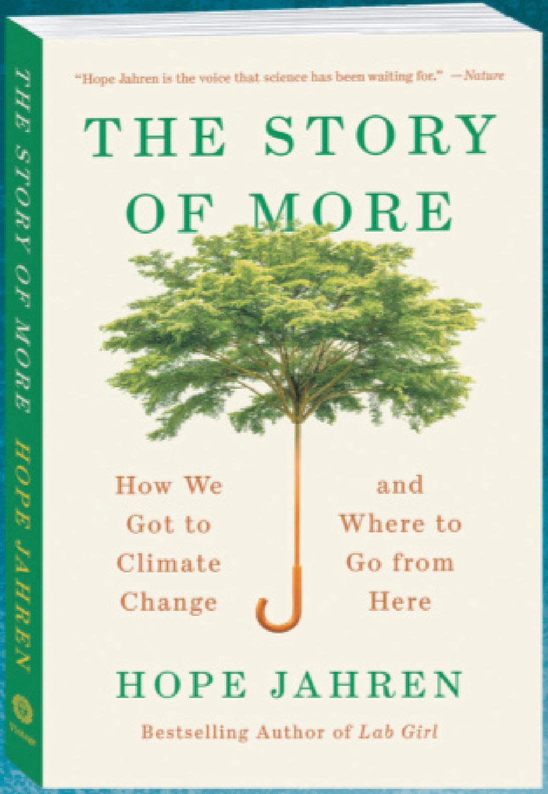
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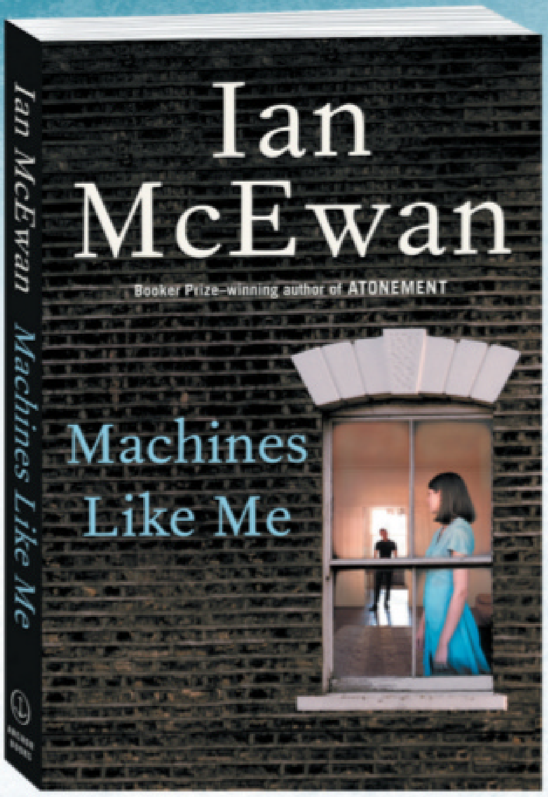
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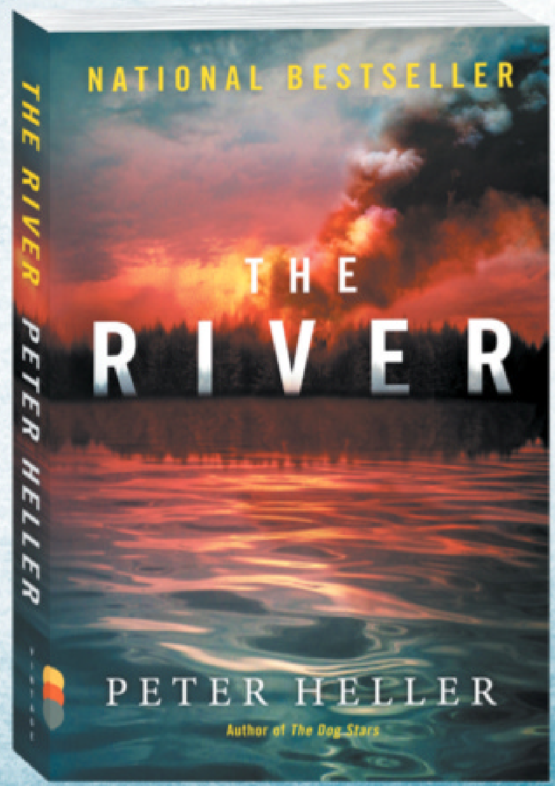
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organics, are spun to the periphery of the internal processor, like lint in a dryer. The Tiger then homogenizes the organic material by dampening and grinding it into bits of mash, thereby hastening decomposition.

The machine's final output comes through one of two spouts. The non-organics spout was blowing out mostly wispy bits of plastic. From the other spout came a slurry of what looked like dirty oatmeal.

The machine soon jammed. An employee wearing yellow work pants hopped up onto the Tiger, opening a side door to reveal several compressed lumps of biodegradable school-lunch trays. "One reason we do a pilot program with the schools is because education is the most important part of this," Morrell said. "We're trying to get kids interested. New York City is eight and a half million people set in their ways." He went on, "You and I grew up throwing things in a landfill. Then the five-cent deposit came out—for glass, for cans. It changed the mind-set." The school board toured the facility and learned that scraping food off the trays before throwing them out—which seems polite—gums up the machines. It's easier if the trays are damp with food.

LeBlanc and Morrell were fond of the Tiger, almost as if it were a pet. "And it came with two Italians," LeBlanc said. The Tiger is made by an Italian company, which sent workers over to install the machine. "We thought they'd be interested in great food, but they were, like, 'We love the place with the girl with the red hair!' It was Wendy's."

Even with the boom in urban farming in Seoul, where half a million residents are involved, to some extent, more compost is being made than can be used. "We have piles like this," Kim Mi-Hwa said, raising a hand to the height of her shoulder. She shook her head. "The food is too much." Last summer, using food scraps for animal feed was paused. "African swine virus," she said. "Until they understand what is causing the outbreak, that part is on hold." Current proposals aim to either lower the price of compost being sold or to improve its quality—it tends to be too high in sodium—by mixing it with other fertilizers. The Ministry of Environment is also supporting the construction of more biogas production facilities, to process more waste. Kim stressed that the only profound solution would be to create less food waste altogether. "Too much *banchan*," she said, referring to the meze-like dishes that are a signature of a Korean meal. "Too much." Koreans generate, on average, two hundred and eighty-five pounds of food waste per person, per year. Americans—not known for their sparseness—average between two hundred and ten and two hundred and fifty pounds. It can be difficult to experience one's own efforts at recycling as meaningful, but it's easy and horrifying to picture being followed around by one's own personal many-tonned monster of trash.

Lucia and I had plans that evening to meet Ahn Sang Hyun, the proprietor of Mr. Ahn's Makgeolli bistro, who was going to show us how his business handled its food scraps. We found the Michelin-rated restaurant on a noisy street known for its craft bars and barbecue.

Ahn is thirty-seven and slim, and was dressed in dark clothing. "Restaurant culture in Korea is a short story," he said, after showing us the small bucket of waste that had been set out for collection. "First, the Japanese invaded. Then there was the Korean War. Then a dictator. Then another dictator." There were restaurants, but there was no restaurant culture. In 1986, Seoul hosted the Asian Games, and in 1988 it hosted the Summer Olympics. Restaurants popped up to serve foreigners, and then stuck around for the locals in a suddenly modern, expanding city. "The idea with Korean restaurants then was abundance—it was about demonstrating growth and economic achievement," Ahn said. A traditional Korean restaurant today is expected to offer many dishes of *banchan* free. "Those *banchan* dishes are for show. Most of it goes to the garbage."

Earlier efforts to reduce food waste included such government campaigns as "No Left-Overs Day," in the nineteen-nineties, but a real shift in food waste would mean changing the notion of what constitutes a great meal. Some restaurants describe the traditional Korean meal as a three-, five-, seven-, nine-, or twelve-*cheop* meal, referring to the number of *banchan*. Others counter that thinking of the Korean meal that way is a modern invention. A small group of restaurateurs, including Ahn, thought, "We'll charge for *banchan*, but serve *banchan* of a quality that people will actually eat," Ahn told me. "Well, customers were unhappy, and said restaurants were being greedy." He laughed. "But in the past five years that sentiment has changed."

Over dinner, Lucia told me that she was planning a birthday party for her boyfriend and had been trying to decide what to serve. He was a member of the Jain religion, from India, which avoids harming all living creatures. There were many foods that he didn't eat, including meat, seafood, and eggs. (Some Jains also don't eat fermented foods, because too many microorganisms die in the fermentation process; some avoid foods grown underground, like potatoes.) "It's very difficult for him to find foods here in Korea," Lucia said.

Her boyfriend, an engineer, had come to Korea for a job at Samsung. He was working on a special refrigerator that can sense what food is inside it, and suggest recipes. Lucia shook her head. She thought there were simpler ways to reduce food waste—making wasting uncool, or making *not* wasting cool. When the government decided to reduce the purchase of bottled water, tap water was "branded" by neighborhood; the tap water in Seoul is *arisu*, a word that has connotations of being refreshing, she explained. It's also an ancient name for the Han River, which runs through the city.

Delicious food arrived. Abalone. A plate of smoked pork, with greens. We looked at the dessert menu, but Lucia told me that she wasn't eating chocolate. It was something she was doing with her boyfriend, because, as part of the religious festival called Paryushana, some Jains choose to give up a particular food for a year. This isn't because the item is immoral or unhealthy. "It's more like: you might give up cabbage," she said. "So that for one year the cabbage could live without fear." She smiled. It was raining outside. Typhoon Mitag had flooded the southern coast, but in Seoul it had dissipated into an ordinary rainstorm. There were no leftovers. ◆

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LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

# IN THE MAIL

BY IAN FRAZIER

**JANUARY 8** Dear Sir,
Your check has been cut and is ready to be mailed to you. The person who will mail it to you is currently being mailed to us. We will keep a close eye on our mail, and as soon as it arrives, with him in it, we will transfer the check to him to mail to you immediately.

**FEBRUARY 15** Dear Sir,
Thank you for your inquiry. Your check is still here, ready to go, but the person who was mailed to us so that he could mail it to you took longer than expected to be mailed. When he finally did arrive, with the rest of our mail, he was mistaken for junk mail and ended up in the recycled mail. We have put in a special request, and another person who will promptly mail your check to you is being mailed to us, via overnight mail.

**MARCH 11** Dear Sir,
The person who was being mailed to us by overnight mail so that he could mail your check to you was mailed from someplace north of the Arctic Circle (we are told), where night lasts a long time, which naturally affects the mail. We are closely tracking this overnight mailing and expect it to arrive at our offices with our other mail as soon as night up there is over—no later than mid-April, we believe. Please be assured that your check is sitting right here on our desk, still crisp and fresh and beautiful, all set to be mailed.

**MARCH 23** Dear Sir,
Just to reassure you that your check really does exist, we are looking at it right now: it is eight inches long by three and a half inches high, printed on that handsome mini-herringbone-patterned background that the best checks are printed on, and it says "Pay to the order of," followed by your clearly typed and correctly spelled name. So there can be no mistake about the exact person for whom the check is intended—you. Your address also appears on the check, which will come in handy when the check is mailed.

**MARCH 24** Dear Sir,
Apologies for contacting you again so soon after our previous communication about your check, but we admired it again this morning, here on our desk, and somehow, in our absence, the sum seems to have been changed to a larger number than it was yesterday! It really is a substantial check. You must be very eager to have such a check mailed to you, and, indeed, in all likelihood, it probably will be mailed before long.

**APRIL 12** Dear Sir,
The mail containing the person whose job it was to mail your check to you arrived, and he has mailed you your check. Unfortunately, our mail service uses a mail drop in which there are two regular-mail slots for outgoing mail, the first marked "EARTH MAIL" and the second marked "OTHER." Assuming that the "EARTH MAIL" slot had something to do with Earth Day, and thinking that was not appropriate, he dropped your check into the slot marked "OTHER." A reasonable mistake—but, regrettably, the "OTHER" slot is for mail addressed to places other than Earth. This may cause a further mail delay, for which we apologize.

**NOVEMBER 18** Dear Sir,
We met a fellow in the past two-three weeks who said that he ran into your check at the famous "Star Wars" bar sometime last summer, although he forgets the exact date. We just thought you would like to know.

**DECEMBER 1** Dear Sir,
Yes, we suppose we could put a "stop" on your check and issue (but not mail) a check to replace the check that we weren't mailing previously—but, really, why bother?

**DECEMBER 8** Dear Sir,
Against our better judgment, we have voided your original check and issued a replacement. Oh, what a gorgeous thing this spanking-new check is! At the moment, it is sitting, pert and pretty, on our desk, waiting to be mailed.

**FEBRUARY 9** Dear Sir,
We were getting way too attached to each other, your check and us, and so we made the painful decision to end the relationship. The check has just been mailed via Ever Go ground service, and we are monitoring its progress. Already, it has travelled half the distance to you, and we are informed that very soon it will cover half the remaining distance, and then, quickly, half the remaining distance after that, etc. So be on the lookout!

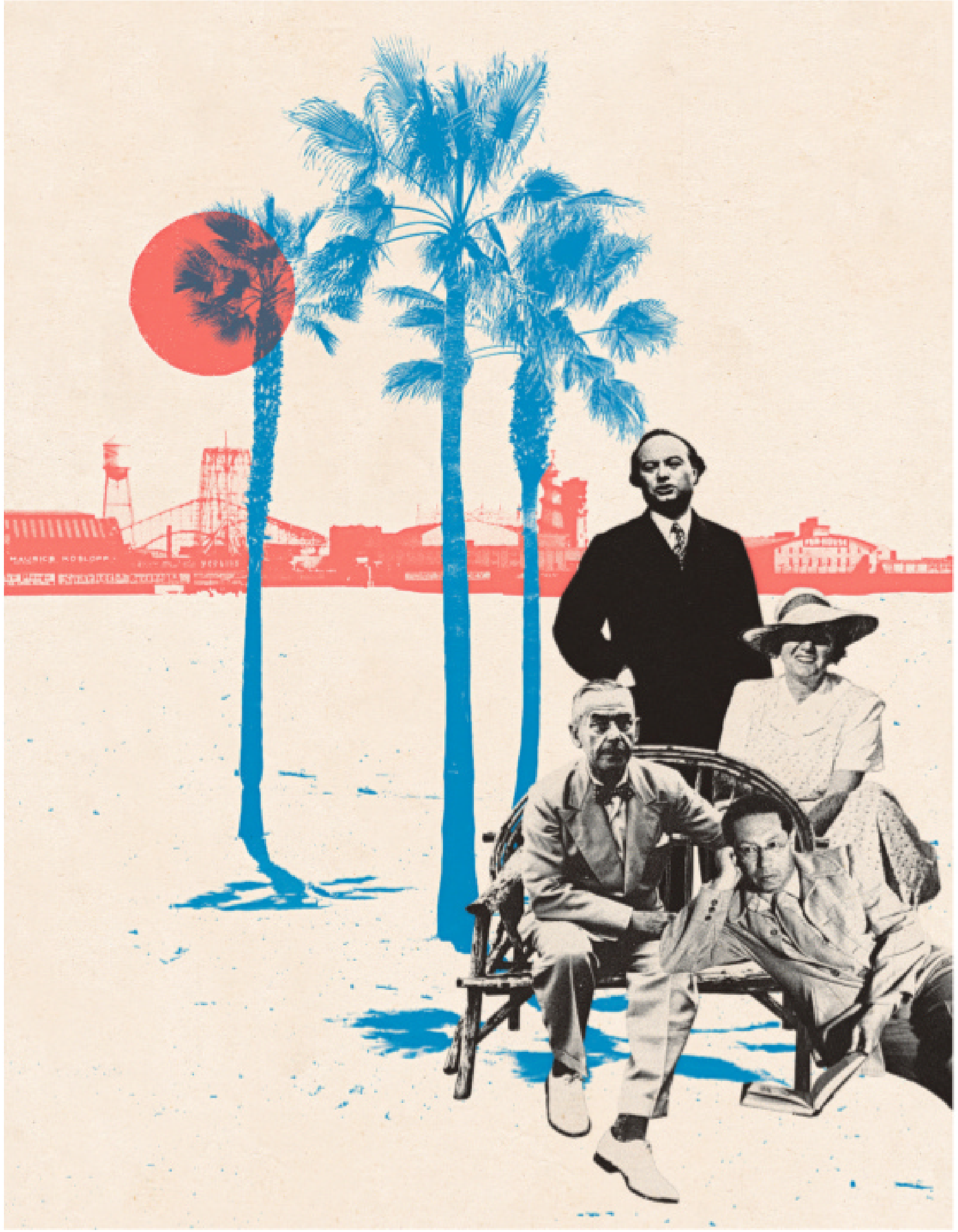
**FEBRUARY 11** Dear Sir,
The driver of the Ever Go truck informs us that he is one-thirty-second of an inch from your address and expects to be one-sixty-fourth of an inch from it shortly. He will make the delivery sometime between eight o'clock Eastern Standard Time this morning (Tuesday, 2/11) and infinity. We appreciate your patience. ♦

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

# EXODUS

*The haunted idyll of exiled German novelists in wartime Los Angeles.*

BY ALEX ROSS



*Clockwise from top: Franz Werfel, Salka Viertel, Lion Feuchtwanger, Thomas Mann.*

You can visit all the addresses in the course of a long day. Bertolt Brecht lived in a two-story clapboard house on Twenty-sixth Street, in Santa Monica. The novelist Heinrich Mann resided a few blocks away, on Montana Avenue. The screenwriter Salka Viertel held gatherings on Mabery Road, near the Santa Monica beach. Alfred Döblin, the author of "Berlin Alexanderplatz," had a place on Citrus Avenue, in Hollywood. His colleague Lion Feuchtwanger occupied the Villa Aurora, a Spanish-style mansion overlooking the Pacific; among its amusements was a Hitler dartboard. Vicki Baum, whose novel "Grand Hotel" brought her a screenwriting career, had a house on Amalfi Drive, near the leftist composer Hanns Eisler. Alma Mahler-Werfel, the widow of Gustav Mahler, lived with her third husband, the best-selling Austrian writer Franz Werfel, on North Bedford Drive, next door to the conductor Bruno Walter. Elisabeth Hauptmann, the co-author of "The Threepenny Opera," lived in Mandeville Canyon, at the actor Peter Lorre's ranch. The philosopher Theodor W. Adorno rented a duplex apartment on Kenter Avenue, meeting with Max Horkheimer, who lived nearby, to write the post-Marxist jeremiad "Dialectic of Enlightenment." At a suitably lofty remove, on San Remo Drive, was Thomas Mann, Heinrich's brother, the august author of "The Magic Mountain."

In the nineteen-forties, the West Side of Los Angeles effectively became the capital of German literature in exile. It was as if the cafés of Berlin, Munich, and Vienna had disgorged their clientele onto Sunset Boulevard. The writers were at the core of a European émigré community that also included the film directors Fritz Lang, Max Ophuls, Otto Preminger, Jean Renoir, Robert Siodmak, Douglas Sirk, Billy Wilder, and William Wyler; the theatre directors Max Reinhardt and Leopold Jessner; the actors Marlene Dietrich and Hedy Lamarr; the architects Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra; and the composers Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, and Sergei Rachmaninoff. Seldom in human history has one city hosted such a staggering convocation of talent.

The standard myth of this great emigration pits the elevated mentality of Central Europe against the supposed "wasteland" or "cultural desert" of Southern California. Indeed, a number of exiles fell to scowling under the palms. Brecht wrote, "The town of Hollywood has taught me this / Paradise and hell / can be one city." The composer Eric Zeisl called California a "sunny blue grave." Adorno could have had Muscle Beach in mind when he identified a social condition called the Health unto Death: "The very people who burst with proofs of exuberant vitality could easily be taken for prepared corpses, from whom the news of their not-quite-successful decease has been withheld for reasons of population policy."

Anecdotes of dyspeptic aloofness belie the richness and the complexity of the émigrés' cultural role. As Ehrhard Bahr argues in his 2007 book, "Weimar on the Pacific," many exiles were able to form bonds with progressive elements in mid-century L.A. Even before the refugees from Nazi Germany arrived, Schindler and Neutra had launched a wave of modernist residential architecture. When Schoenberg taught at U.S.C. and U.C.L.A., he guided such native-born radical spirits as John Cage and Lou Harrison. Surprising alliances sprang up among the newcomers and adventurous members of the Hollywood set. Charlie Chaplin and George Gershwin played tennis with Schoenberg.

ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO

Charles Laughton took the lead in a 1947 production of Brecht's "Galileo."

Nevertheless, even the most resourceful of the émigrés faced psychological turmoil. Whatever their opinion of L.A., they could not escape the universal condition of the refugee, in which images of the lost homeland intrude on any attempt to begin anew. They felt an excruciating dissonance between their idyllic circumstances and the horrors that were unfolding in Europe. Furthermore, they saw the all too familiar forces of intolerance and indifference lurking beneath America's shining façades. To revisit exile literature against the trajectory of early-twentieth-century politics makes one wonder: What would it be like to flee one's native country in terror or disgust, and start over in an unknown land?

Two of Germany's leading novelists had the good fortune to be away on lecture tours as the Nazis were taking over. On February 11, 1933, two weeks after Hitler became Chancellor, Thomas Mann travelled to Amsterdam to deliver a talk titled "The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner." A onetime conservative who had embraced liberal-democratic values in the early nineteen-twenties, Mann was attempting to wrest his favorite composer from Nazi appropriation. He did not set foot in Germany again until 1949. In the same period, Feuchtwanger, a German-Jewish writer of strong leftist convictions, was touring the U.S., speaking on such topics as "Revival of Barbarism in Modern Times." He died in L.A., in 1958.

At first, many of the exiles fled to France. Few of them believed that Hitler's reign would last long, and a trip across the ocean seemed excessive. Feuchtwanger and others settled in Sanary-sur-Mer, on the Riviera, where the Mediterranean climate offered a dry run for the Southern California experience. The onset of the Second World War, in 1939, instantly destroyed this temporary paradise. The fact that the émigrés were victims of repression did not save them from being thrown into French internment camps. Feuchtwanger captured the surreal misery of the experience in his nonfiction narrative "The Devil in France," which has been reissued under the aegis of the Feuchtwanger Memorial Library, at U.S.C. The devil in question was the same shrugging heartlessness that later enabled the deportation of nearly seventy-five thousand French Jews to Nazi death camps.

When, in 1940, Germany invaded France, Feuchtwanger was in dire danger of being captured by the Gestapo. His wife, Marta, helped arrange an elaborate escape, which required him to don a woman's coat and shawl. That September, a motley group that included Franz Werfel, Alma Mahler, Heinrich Mann and his wife, Nelly, and Thomas Mann's son Golo hiked across the Pyrenees, from France into Spain. Mahler carried a large bag containing several of her first husband's manuscripts and the original score of Anton Bruckner's Third Symphony.

High-placed friends conspired to keep these celebrity refugees safe. Eleanor Roosevelt, an avid reader of Feuchtwanger's books, became alarmed when she saw a photograph of the author in a French camp. A New York-based organization called the Emergency Rescue Committee dispatched the journalist Varian Fry to France to facilitate the extraction of writers and other artists, often by extralegal means. Such measures were required because American immigration laws limited European nationals to strict quotas. If the quotas had been relaxed, many more thousands of Jews could have escaped. Fry, the first American to be honored at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, ignored his narrow remit and worked heroically to help as many people as possible, including those without name recognition.

Anna Seghers, a German-Jewish Communist who spent the war in Mexico City, painted a brutal picture of the crisis in her novel "Transit" (1944), which New York Review Books republished in 2013, in a translation by Margot Bettauer Dembo. Refugees in France must negotiate a bureaucratic maze of entrance visas, exit visas, transit visas, and American affidavits. The main character's plan for escape relies on his having been mistaken for a noted writer (one who is actually dead, by suicide). Another's path to freedom depends on transporting two dogs that belong to a couple from Boston. All around Marseille are "the remnants of crushed armies, escaped slaves, human hordes who had been chased from all the countries of the earth, and having at last reached the sea, boarded ships in order to discover new lands from which they would again be driven; forever running from one death to another."

By 1941, the full company of exiles had arrived in Los Angeles, blinking in the sun. Their daily routines were often absurd. Several writers, including Heinrich Mann and Döblin, were granted one-year contracts at Warner Bros. and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. These offers had little to do with active interest in their talent; rather, the motivation was to help them obtain visas. Required to play their part in this benevolent charade, Mann and Döblin reported for work each day, even though their English was poor and their ideas had no hope of being produced. Once the contracts ran out, the two struggled financially. Döblin wrote, "On the West Coast there are only two categories of writers: those who sit in clover and those who sit in dirt."

Such doleful tales raise the question of why so many writers fled to L.A. Why not go to New York, where exiled visual artists gathered in droves? Ehrhard Bahr answers that the "lack of a cultural infrastructure" in L.A. was attractive: it allowed refugees to reconstitute the ideals of the Weimar Republic instead of competing with an extant literary scene. In addition, film work was an undeniable draw. Brecht's anti-Hollywood invective hides the fact that he worked industriously to find a place as a screenwriter, and co-wrote Fritz Lang's "Hangmen Also Die!" Even Thomas Mann flirted with Hollywood; there was talk of a film adaptation of "The Magic Mountain," with Montgomery Clift as Hans Castorp and Greta Garbo as Clavdia Chauchat.

The real explanation for the German literary migration to L.A., though, has to do with the steady growth of a network of friendly connections, and at its center was Salka Viertel. Donna Rifkind pays tribute to this irresistibly dynamic figure in "The Sun and Her Stars: Salka Viertel and Hitler's Exiles in the Golden Age of Hollywood" (Other Press), and New York Review Books recently reissued Viertel's addictive memoir, "The Kindness of Strangers." Viertel worked tirelessly to obtain visas for endangered artists, and to help them find their footing when they arrived. Weimar on the

Victoria Roberts

*"Myra, if you really mean it about restructuring, let's lose the shepherd and keep the sheepdogs."*

• •

Pacific might never have existed without her.

Viertel had been in L.A. since 1928, when her husband, the director Berthold Viertel, received a studio contract. Ernst Lubitsch, F. W. Murnau, and Erich von Stroheim had already given Hollywood a German accent. Salka had been an actor on the German stage; she now turned to screenwriting, collaborating frequently with Garbo, one of her closest friends. Bohemians rotated through her house. (Christopher Isherwood lived for a while in an apartment over the garage.) She regularly threw parties, curating conversations among a dazzling assortment of guests—everyone from Schoenberg to Ava Gardner—and then repairing to the kitchen to prepare her much lauded *Sacher Torte*. Rifkind reports that Thomas Mann once showed up at the wedding of strangers because he had heard that Viertel's torte would be served.

Rifkind persuasively argues that Viertel was far more than a bon vivant: she had a genius for fostering creative relationships. Franz Waxman fell into a career as a Hollywood composer after striking up a conversation with the director James Whale in Viertel's living room. Brecht and Charles Laughton first met there. To be sure, not all of Viertel's mediations panned out. She facilitated a legendarily unsuccessful meeting between Schoenberg and the studio head Irving Thalberg, who was seeking a composer for an adaptation of Pearl Buck's "The Good Earth." As Viertel relates in her memoir, Schoenberg told Thalberg that he would need complete creative control, and that the actors would have to conform to pitches and rhythms specified in his score.

That story is often cited for comic effect, to illustrate the irreconcilability of European values with those of Hollywood. When Thalberg complimented Schoenberg on his "lovely music"—one of the composer's less challenging scores had recently been played on the radio—Schoenberg snapped, "I don't write lovely music." For Rifkind, the anecdote demonstrates that Viertel was not a mere observer in this social world but its master of ceremonies: "She was the mutual contact who first made it possible for the composer and the producer to meet. She was the diplomat with a firm grasp of the complexities of both milieus." Even if Schoenberg wrote nothing for Hollywood, his influence on film scoring was immense.

The émigré community certainly needed Viertel's diplomacy. The struggling authors resented the popular ones. Misunderstandings arose between political refugees—those who had been aligned with the left or had strongly protested Nazism—and Jewish refugees, whose political sympathies ranged widely. The Austrians tended to band together; the musicians spoke their own language. The two opposing poles were Brecht and Thomas Mann, who had long disliked each other. Brecht saw Mann as a grandiose narcissist with no empathy for lesser spirits. Mann recoiled from Brecht's combativeness, although when he read "Mother Courage and Her Children" he was forced to admit that "the beast has talent."

Feuchtwanger, Werfel, Döblin, and Thomas and Heinrich Mann were all mainstays at the Viertel salons. On one occasion, they and dozens of others gathered to celebrate Heinrich's seventieth birthday. The brothers rose in turn, each pulling a sheaf of papers from his coat pocket and reading an exhaustive appreciation of the other's work. Afterward, Viertel told the writer Bruno Frank how much the spectacle had moved her. Frank responded, "They write and read such ceremonial evaluations of each other every ten years."

The array of personalities was formidable and eccentric. The Manns, scions of an old North German merchant family, were bourgeois to the core. Thomas had "the reserved politeness of a diplomat on official duty," Viertel wrote; Heinrich, the "manners of a nineteenth-century *grand seigneur*." Feuchtwanger was tan and fit, though he liked nothing more than to withdraw into his vast library and burrow into rare books. Döblin, of Pomeranian-Jewish background, had a cutting wit, which was often directed at Thomas Mann. Werfel, the son of German-speaking Jews in Prague, was the most politically conservative of the group, prone to outbursts against the Bolsheviks. Nonetheless, he was well liked—a mystic in a crowd of skeptics.

All five novelists had been alert to political danger in their work of the nineteen-twenties and early thirties. Feuchtwanger's breakthrough novel, "Jew Süss," contains harrowing evocations of anti-Jewish violence in eighteenth-century Germany; his "Success," set in Munich in the early twenties, caricatures Hitler as a pompous thug. In Döblin's "Berlin Alexanderplatz," the ex-convict Franz Biberkopf supports himself, in part, by selling the Nazi newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter*. Thomas Mann's novella "Mario and the Magician" is a parable of Fascist manipulation. Heinrich Mann had been more farsighted than any of them, as Thomas acknowledged in his birthday speech at Viertel's. Heinrich's "Der Untertan," or "The Underling,"

PREVIOUS SPREAD (PHOTOGRAPHS, LEFT TO RIGHT): DICK WHITTINGTON STUDIO / CORBIS / GETTY; ASHLEY CORBIN-TEICH / GETTY;
THOMAS MANN ARCHIVE / ULLSTEIN BILD / GETTY; NEW YORK TIMES CO. / GETTY; AP; SCHULBERG COLLECTION

written before the First World War but not published until 1918, is the definitive portrait of German nationalism curdling into chauvinism and anti-Semitism.

The most haunting of these pre-Nazi novels is Werfel's "The Forty Days of Musa Dagh" (1933), which was not translated fully into English until 2012. The book honors the valiant resistance of an Armenian community during the genocide of the First World War and after. Werfel accomplishes a feat of large-scale narrative control, replete with hair-raising battle scenes. He also delivers the first great fictional reckoning with the psychology of genocide. At one point, the German protestant missionary Johannes Lepsius, based on a real-life figure, encounters Enver Pasha, one of the chief agents of the genocide: "What Herr Lepsius perceived was that arctic mask of the human being who 'has overcome all sentimentality'—the mask of a human mind which has got beyond guilt and all its qualms."

After 1933, the exiles had to come to grips with a world that surpassed their most extravagant nightmares. One popular stratagem was to insert contemporary allegories into historical fiction, which was enjoying an extended vogue. Heinrich Mann produced a hefty pair of novels dramatizing the life of King Henry IV of France. A gruesome description of the Bartholomew's Day Massacre makes one think of pogroms in Nazi Germany, and the leaders of the Catholic League radiate Fascist ruthlessness. Döblin, by contrast, immersed himself in recent history, undertaking a novel cycle titled "November 1918." It examines the German Revolution of 1918-19, with the Communist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht featured as principal characters. Döblin seems almost to be reliving the Revolution and its aftermath, in the hope that it will have a better outcome.

A handful of émigré novels have emigration itself as their subject. Seghers's "Transit" is the classic example of the genre, but others are worth revisiting. Feuchtwanger's "Exil," translated into English as "Paris Gazette," is a soulful satire, set among disputatious emigrants in Paris. Sepp Trautwein, the protagonist, is a high-minded German composer who transforms himself into a belligerent anti-Nazi newspaper columnist. His finest hour comes when he invents an absurd speech by Hitler on the subject of Wagner. Exile is a humiliation, Feuchtwanger writes, but it makes you "quicker, more ingenious, subtler, harder."

A more desperate vision emerges in the work of Klaus Mann, Thomas's oldest son, who labored all his life in his father's cold shadow. "The Volcano," published in German in 1939, three years after he arrived in the United States, registers the toll that exile exacted on the young. In scenes anticipating Klaus's own fate—he died of a drug overdose in 1949, at forty-two—characters spiral into suicidal despair or chemical oblivion. Hollywood provides no respite: "All was false here—the palms, the sunsets, the fruit, nothing had reality, everything was swindle, mere scenery." The novel's depiction of gay desire presumably explains why an English translation never appeared. At the end of the narrative, a mystically inclined Brazilian boy converses with an angel, who kisses him on the lips, takes him on a flight around the world, and brings the consoling news that tolerance reigns in Heaven.

Werfel, having prophesied Nazi terror in "Musa Dagh," shied away from a head-on confrontation with it. At the start of his final novel, a bizarre and fascinating experiment called "Star of the Unborn" (1946), Werfel confesses his inability to address the "monstrous reality" of the day. In a sly way, the novel speaks to that reality all the same. The narrator, F.W., is transported to a peaceful utopia in the distant future, which collapses into chaos. The tone is mainly playful, even zany, but a chill descends when F.W. visits a facility known as Wintergarden, in which those who have tired of life undergo a "retrovolution" into infancy and then death. The process sometimes goes awry, producing ghastly mutations. It is a conjuring of the Holocaust written just as reports of the German death camps were appearing.

Thomas Mann, the uncrowned emperor of Germany in exile, lived in a spacious, white-walled aerie in Pacific Palisades, which the émigré architect J. R. Davidson had designed to his specifications. He saw "Bambi" at the Fox Theatre in Westwood; he ate Chinese food; he listened to Jack Benny on

It has always seemed strange to me
that in our endless discussions
about education
so little stress is laid on the
*pleasure*
of becoming an educated person,
the enormous interest it adds to life.
To be able to be caught up
into the world of thought
-- that is to be educated.

*Edith Hamilton in the*
*Saturday Evening Post 9-27-58*

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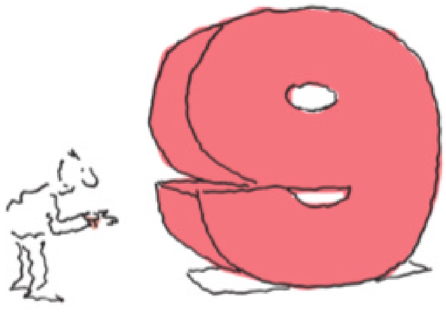
the radio; he furtively admired handsome men in uniform; he puzzled over the phenomenon of the "Baryton-Boy Frankie Sinatra," to quote his diaries. Like almost all the émigrés, he never attempted to write fiction about America. He was completing his own historical epic, the tetralogy "Joseph and His Brothers," which is vastly more entertaining than its enormous length might suggest. The Biblical Joseph is reinvented as a wily, seductive youth who escapes spectacularly from predicaments of his own making, and eventually emerges, in the service of the Pharaoh, as a masterly bureaucrat of social reform. It's as if Tadzio from "Death in Venice" grew up to become Henry Wallace.

Mann's comfortable existence depended on a canny marketing plan devised by his publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, Sr. The scholar Tobias Boes, in his recent book, "Thomas Mann's War" (Cornell), describes how Knopf remade a difficult, quizzical author as the "Greatest Living Man of Letters," an animate statue of European humanism. The supreme ironist became the high dean of the Book-of-the-Month Club. The florid and error-strewn translations of Helen Lowe-Porter added to this ponderous impression. (John E. Woods's translations of the major novels, published between 1993 and 2005, are far superior.) Yet Knopf's positioning enabled Mann to assume a new public role: that of spokesperson for the anti-Nazi cause. Boes writes, "Because he so manifestly stood above the partisan fray, Mann was able to speak out against Hitler and be perceived as a voice of reason rather than be dismissed as an agitator."

Essays like "The Coming Victory of Democracy" and "War and Democracy" remain dismayingly relevant in the era of Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán, and Donald Trump. In 1938, Mann stated, "Even America feels today that democracy is not an assured possession, that it has enemies, that it is threatened from within and from without, that it has once more become a problem." At such moments, he said, the division between the political and the nonpolitical disappears. Politics is "no longer a game, played according to certain, generally acknowledged rules. . . . It's a matter of ultimate values." Mann also challenged the xenophobia of America's strict immigration laws: "It is not human, not democratic, and it means to show a moral Achilles' heel to the fascist enemies of mankind if one clings with bureaucratic coldness to these laws."

On the subject of German war guilt, Mann incited a controversy that persisted for decades. He was acutely aware that mass murder was taking place in Nazi-occupied lands—a genocide that went far beyond what Werfel had described in "Musa Dagh." As early as January, 1942, in a radio address to Germans throughout Europe, Mann disclosed that four hundred Dutch Jews had been killed by poison gas—a "true Siegfried weapon," he added, in a sardonic reference to the fearless hero of Germanic legend. In a 1945 speech titled "The Camps," he said, "Every German—everyone who speaks German, writes German, has lived as a German—is affected by this shameful exposure. It is not a small clique of criminals who are involved."

The overwhelming fact of the Holocaust led Mann to call for a searching self-examination on the part of German people all over the world. In "Germany and the Germans," a remarkable speech delivered at the Library of Congress in 1945, he argued that the demonic energies of Hitler's regime had roots reaching back to Martin Luther. Mann did not exclude himself from the web of shame: "It is all within me. I have been through it all." In the end, he said, "there are not two Germanys, a good one and a bad one, but only one, whose best turned into evil through devilish cunning." The entire story is a "paradigm of the tragedy of human life." That message of universal responsibility—which, Mann made clear, is not the same as universal guilt—aroused fierce opposition in postwar Germany, where searching self-examination was not in fashion. Allied forces, for their part, were happy to skate over the de-Nazification process, so that Western Europe could focus on fighting a new enemy, the Soviets.



Mann's words also caused a flap among the émigrés. Brecht and Döblin both criticized their colleague for condemning ordinary Germans alongside Nazi élites. Brecht went so far as to write a poem titled "When the Nobel Prize Winner Thomas Mann Granted the Americans and English the Right to Chastise the German People for Ten Long Years for the Crimes of the Hitler Regime." In fact, Mann disapproved of punitive measures, but his nuances were overlooked. As Hans Rudolf Vaget has shown, in his comprehensive 2011 study, "Thomas Mann, der Amerikaner," the fallout from "Germany and the Germans" clouded Mann's reputation for a generation. Only after several decades did the wisdom of his approach become clear, as Germany established a model for how a nation can work through its past—a process that is ongoing.

Mann's cross-examination of the German soul had a fictional component. In 1947, he published the novel "Doctor Faustus," in which a modernist German composer makes a pact with the Devil—or, at least, hallucinates himself doing so. In great part, it is a retelling of the life of Friedrich Nietzsche, of his plunge from rarefied intellectual heights into megalomania and madness. It is also Mann's most sustained exploration of the realm of music, which, to him, had always seemed seductive and dangerous in equal measure. The shadow of Wagner hangs over the book, even if Adrian Leverkühn, the character at its center, is anti-Wagnerian in orientation, his works mixing atonality, neoclassicism, ironic neo-Romanticism, and the unfulfilled compositional fantasies of Adorno, who assisted Mann in writing the musical descriptions.

The narrator of "Doctor Faustus" is a humanist scholar named Serenus Zeitblom. With a high-bourgeois mien and a digressive prose style, Zeitblom is unmistakably an exercise in authorial self-parody, and he begins writing his memoir of Leverkühn in May, 1943, on the same day that Mann himself set to work on the novel. But Zeitblom is not in Los Angeles. Rather, he belongs to the so-called inner emigration—the cohort of German intellectuals who professed to oppose Nazism from within the country. Mann rejected the concept of inner emigration when it surfaced after the war, and Zeitblom, with his ineffectual reservations about the regime, stands in for such compromised figures as the playwright Gerhart Hauptmann and the poet Gottfried Benn.

The novel caused its own commotion within the émigré community. Leverkühn is presented as the originator of the twelve-tone method of composition—a historical distortion that infuriated Schoenberg. Mann was forced to add a prefatory note in which he gave Schoenberg credit. (The tale is laid out in "The Doctor Faustus Dossier," edited by Randol Schoenberg, the composer's grandson.) Furthermore, the novel's allegorical structure appears to equate the diabolical complexities of modern music with the death fugue of German politics. Schoenberg, who had perceived the genocidal potential of Nazi anti-Semitism far earlier than Mann had, understandably resented the implication. Yet Leverkühn is in no way a stand-in for Hitler: he is strangely righteous in his cold-minded quest for extreme sounds and apocalyptic visions. Mann comments in his diaries that the composer is a "hero of our times . . . *my* ideal."

If a simple message can be extracted from the pitch-black labyrinth of "Doctor Faustus," it is that art cannot escape its context, no matter how much it strives toward higher spheres. Ultimately, the book is another Mannian ritual of self-interrogation. Marta Feuchtwanger once said of the novelist, "He felt in a way responsible as a German. . . . He defended the First World War and also the emperor. Later on, it seems that he recognized his error; maybe that was the reason that he was so terribly upset about the whole thing, more than anybody else." There is, she commented, "no greater hate than a lost love."

*"Oops, I set the thermostat too high."*

Few obvious traces of the emigration persist in contemporary Los Angeles. A city that is flexing its power as an international arts capital ought to do more to honor this golden age of the not too distant past. But the evidence is there if you search for it. You can still hear stories about the principals from the composer Walter Arlen, aged ninety-nine, and the sublime actor and raconteur Norman Lloyd, aged a hundred and five. A modest tourist business has built up around the legacy of the émigré architects. The homes of Thomas Mann and Feuchtwanger are now under the purview of the German government, which offers residencies there to scholars and artists. The programmers at the Mann house, which has undergone a meticulous renovation, are soliciting video essays on the future of democracy—a topic as fraught today as it was when the author took it up in the nineteen-thirties.

The improbable idyll of Weimar on the Pacific dissipated quickly. Werfel and Bruno Frank both died in 1945. Nelly Mann, Heinrich's wife, died the previous year, by suicide; Heinrich died in 1950. Döblin went to Germany to assist in the de-Nazification effort, meeting with considerable frustration. Those exiles who remained in America felt mounting insecurity as the Cold War took hold. McCarthyism made no exceptions for leftist writers who had been persecuted by the Nazis. Brecht left in 1947, the day after he appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee, and later settled in East Germany. Feuchtwanger longed to return to Europe but, having never been granted U.S. citizenship, chose not to risk leaving.

Thomas Mann, who had become an American citizen in 1944, felt the dread of déjà vu. The likes of McCarthy, Hoover, and Nixon had crossed his line of sight before. In 1947, after the blacklisting of the Hollywood Ten, he recorded a broadcast in which he warned of incipient Fascist tendencies: "Spiritual intolerance, political inquisition, and declining legal security, and all this in the name of an alleged 'state of emergency': that is how it started in Germany." Two years later, he found his face featured in a *Life* magazine spread titled "Dupes and Fellow Travelers." In his diary, he commented that it looked like a *Steckbrief:* a "Wanted" poster.

To stand in Mann's study today, with editions of Goethe and Schiller on the shelves, is to feel pride in the country that took him in and shame for the country that drove him out—not two Americas but one. In this room, the erstwhile "Greatest Living Man of Letters" fell prey to the clammy fear of the hunted. Was the year 1933 about to repeat itself? Would he be detained, interrogated, even imprisoned? In 1952, Mann took a final walk through his house and made his exit. He died in Zurich, in 1955—no longer an émigré German but an American in exile. ♦

### THE POLITICAL SCENE

# #WINNING

*Brad Parscale used social media to sway the 2016 election. He's poised to do it again.*

BY ANDREW MARANTZ

In September, at a resort hotel in the Coachella Valley, the California Republican Party held its fall convention. Brad Parscale—forty-four, six feet eight, balding, prolifically bearded—walked onstage in shirtsleeves and tilted the microphone upward, mumbling a self-deprecating joke about being "awkwardly tall." Parscale has lived in a red county in California and a blue county in Texas, and he now splits his time between Washington, D.C., and two luxury properties in South Florida, yet he still speaks with the neutral accent of Topeka, Kansas, where he grew up. He was one of the top staffers on Donald Trump's 2016 campaign. "I was the digital-media director," he said. "So, yes, all that crazy Facebook stuff was my idea." Other former Trump-campaign officials fill their calendars with paid speaking gigs, padding their remarks with jingoistic platitudes or rapturous accounts of Trump's improbable victory. Parscale appears in public less often. When he does, he gets to the point.

"We have turned the R.N.C. into one of the largest data-gathering operations in United States history," he said. He was referring to the Republican National Committee, which has raised two hundred and sixty-three million dollars for the 2020 elections. (The Democratic National Committee has raised just over a hundred million.) As Parscale explained, the Trump campaign has been operating more or less full time since 2016, continually improving its "technology and data operations." During this period, the campaign and the R.N.C. have essentially merged, sharing staff, voter data, and other resources. The Democrats do not yet have a nominee for President, and some of their systems for acquiring and sharing data are considered outdated by comparison. "You cannot just build an app, or build out data, in the few months you have from the Convention," Parscale said. "The Democrats will have that problem this time. As they all interfight, we are building for our future." Two years ago, Parscale was named the manager of Trump's 2020 campaign. "I know everybody wants me to do it from my laptop," he joked to the audience. "Not possible. I've already done that once."

Before Parscale worked for the campaign, he was a digital marketer in San Antonio with no political experience. Referring to his work for Trump in 2016, he has said, "I was thrown into the Super Bowl, never played a game, and won." But it might be more apt to compare Parscale to the technicians who operated Watson, the I.B.M. supercomputer, while it successfully competed against two humans on "Jeopardy!" Machine learning and social-media algorithms are upending most aspects of contemporary life, including politics. One of Parscale's advantages was that he recognized this fact and didn't hesitate to make full use of it.

In previous elections, Presidential campaign managers tried to be strategic about where to hold public events, which slogans to emphasize in which media markets, when to give an interview to *Elle* or to *Esquire*. These were forms of targeting. We are now in the era of microtargeting, which began, arguably, in 2012—the year of Facebook's I.P.O., then the largest in Silicon Valley history—and will continue, inarguably, long past 2020. It's no longer good enough to run one radio ad in Scranton and another one in Pittsburgh. These days, campaigns can carve the electorate into creepily thin segments: Gold Star moms near military bases, paintball-playing widowers in the Florida Panhandle, recovering addicts in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. And, for anyone who wants to reach a specific audience with an actionable message, there has never been a platform as potent as Facebook. No matter how many bad press cycles or localized boycotts the company endures, the number of users keeps expanding; on average, those users are growing older, and that presumably redounds to Trump's advantage. "I understood early that Facebook was how Donald Trump was going to win," Parscale said, in October, 2017, on "60 Minutes." "Facebook was the method—it was the highway which his car drove on."

The instant a Presidential election is over, everyone who worked on the losing campaign is recast as a dunce, and everyone on the winning side is reborn as a genius. In 2016, three weeks after Election Day, Harvard's Institute of Politics hosted a panel discussion featuring leaders of Hillary Clinton's campaign and Trump's campaign—the first public reunion of the now dunces and the now geniuses. It got heated.

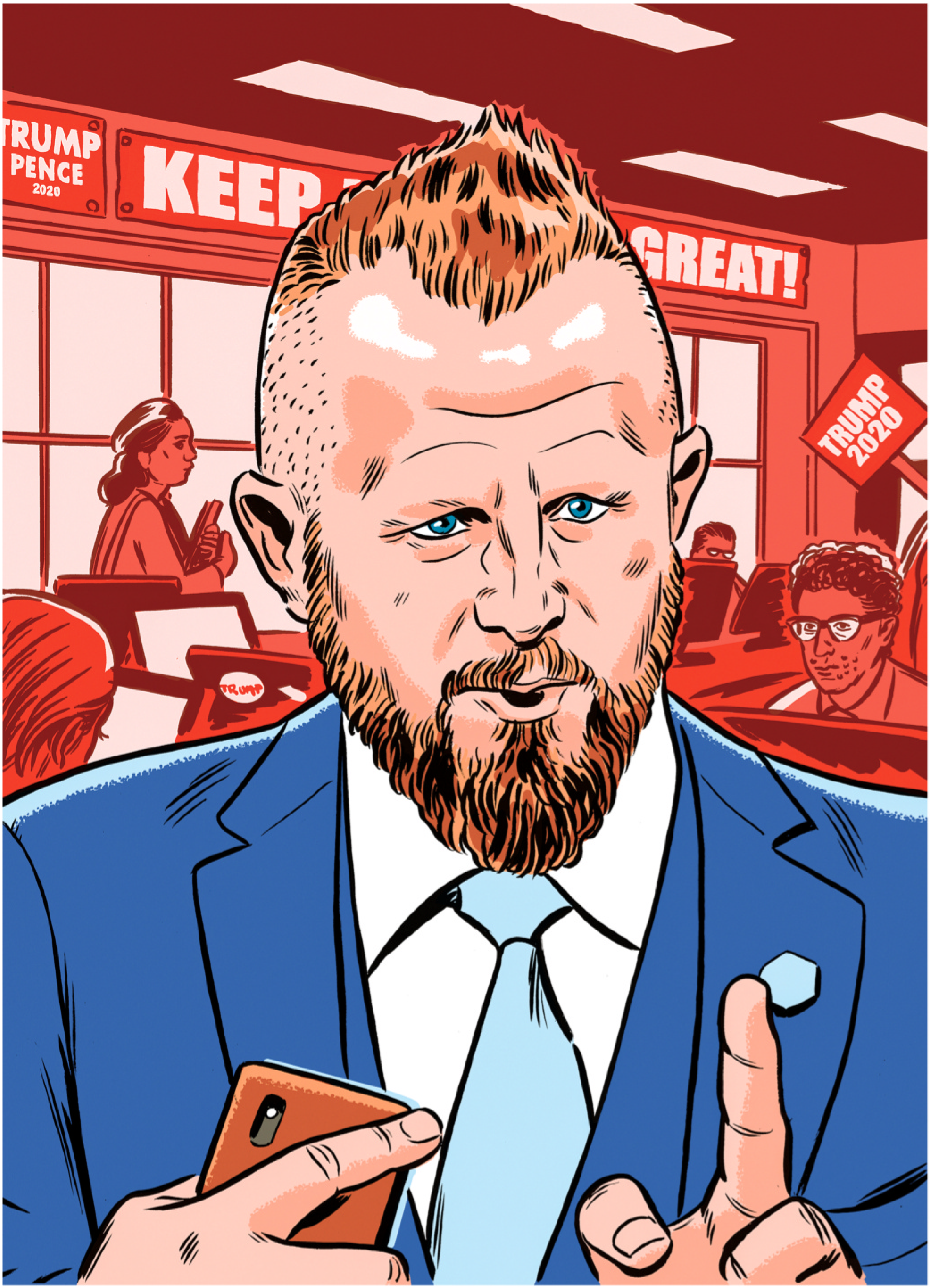
"I would rather lose than win the way you guys did," Jennifer Palmieri, Clinton's director of communications, said.

"No, you wouldn't, respectfully," Kellyanne Conway, one of Trump's campaign managers, said.

Later in the discussion, Mandy Grunwald, another Clinton adviser, rephrased Palmieri's rebuke as a backhanded compliment. "I don't think you guys give yourselves enough credit for the negative campaign you ran," she said, alluding to "the fake Facebook stuff, or the great dark-arts stuff you were pumping out there." Turning to Parscale, she went on, "I'm fascinated to hear all about that, because it's so hard for us to track."

"I'd agree," he said. "That's the beauty of Facebook."

Another morning-after-Election Day tradition is the postmortem. Every political demise has a hundred etiologies. Still, when it comes to the 2016 election, we can't seem to help ourselves: Was it the Russians? The letter from James Comey? The weather in Wisconsin? These days, the culprit many people settle on is the Internet. "There's a tendency to turn it into a catchall explanation," David Plouffe, a Democratic strategist who was Barack


TRUMP
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2020
TRUMP

*On Facebook, Parscale moved fast and broke things, but it seems that the things he broke were norms, not laws.*

ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTIAN HAMMERSTAD

Obama's campaign manager in 2008, told me recently. "Which is understandable, given how powerful it is, and how hard it is for most people to understand." Plouffe came to prominence at a time when social media was generally perceived as innocuous, even liberatory. He and his team made extensive use of digital fund-raising, organizing, and advertising; after Obama's victory, they were hailed as innovators. "At the same time, the digital stuff is not a magic potion," he continued. "It's an ever-evolving tool. A tool that the Trump campaign, whatever else you want to say about them, used quite effectively." (Plouffe is now an adviser to the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, a philanthropic organization set up by Facebook's founder and C.E.O., Mark Zuckerberg, and his wife, Priscilla Chan.)

Between June and November of 2016, Parscale's firm was paid ninety-four million dollars, most of which went toward digital advertising. Some of the ads were standard fare about national security or the debt; others were designed to help Trump's mendacity and nativism go viral on social media, where lies and fractious memes are disproportionately likely to be amplified. Facebook did not maintain an archive of its political ads until 2018, so some of the 2016 campaign's dodgier efforts may be lost to history. But we do know that Trump tweeted an image, originally circulated on anti-Semitic message boards, of Hillary Clinton's face, a Jewish star, and a pile of cash; that one of Parscale's staffers made an ad featuring audio of Hillary Clinton referring to African-Americans as "superpredators" (the intention was to micro-target the ad to black Facebook users in swing states); and that Defeat Crooked Hillary, a Facebook page funded by a pro-Trump super PAC, disseminated several conspiratorial videos, including one insinuating that Clinton was taking illicit drugs and another alleging that she had undisclosed ties to Vladimir Putin.

The point of all this, of course, was to sway the election in Trump's favor, and, given the election's narrow margins, it's highly possible that it worked. (The Internet Research Agency, a troll farm associated with Putin, purchased thirty-five hundred Facebook ads between 2015 and 2017; Parscale and his team bought millions.) None of this is evidence of election-related malfeasance, however. Most social platforms have rules against harassment, hate speech, and violent threats, but they have usually granted exceptions to those rules when the boundaries are tested by a Presidential campaign, or by the President. Parscale used Facebook to move fast and break things, but it seems that the things he broke were long-standing norms, not laws. However, the Internet has disrupted global politics so rapidly, and regulators have been so slow to adjust to the new reality, that there weren't many relevant laws to break.

In response to questions from *The New Yorker*, Parscale issued a written statement, which read, in part, "This isn't journalism, it's a transparent attempt to divert attention away from the fact that President Donald Trump is on track to steamroll past the socialists and win reelection this November." He did not agree to be interviewed for this article, but dozens of people did, including people who worked with him and against him in 2016. Predictably, Parscale's name elicited praise from most pro-Trump Republicans and scorn from nearly everyone else. "I can tell you with high confidence that Brad Parscale is not a genius," Tara McGowan, a left-leaning strategist, told me. Nevertheless, "he undoubtedly had a massive impact on the outcome of the 2016 election, and he undoubtedly will again in 2020." For better or worse, she continued, "you don't need to be a genius to have a massive impact. You don't even need to break the rules. An average person, given enough time and money and support, can use Facebook to help a demagogue win a national election."

Parscale often tweaks his biography, in Trumpian fashion, to suit his immediate needs. Sometimes he portrays himself as having been an aimless rube before a fortuitous encounter with Donald Trump. Other times, he says that his work on the Trump campaign was merely an extension of "what I've done for twenty years." Recently, warming up the crowd at a Trump rally in Florida, Parscale spoke as an avatar of red-state alienation: "I was born in Kansas. And people in Kansas don't matter. I lived in Texas. They tried to push our voice out." On Instagram, he looks more like a member of the Intracoastal élite, posting a video from aboard his thirty-two-foot Sea Ray cruiser ("Love boating through Fort Lauderdale"), or a photo of an outdoor fire pit next to an emerald-green patch of lawn ("Good fire night! 🔥").

In a 2016 interview with *Wired*, Parscale called himself "a farm boy from Kansas." His childhood home was not on a farm but on a paved cul-de-sac in Topeka, within walking distance of a Sonic Drive-In and a disk-golf course. His parents, Dwight and Rita, were entrepreneurs whose businesses, according to ProPublica, "included a swimming pool company, a scuba shop, real estate enterprises, restaurants and a Western-themed nightclub featuring a mechanical bull." "Am I worth over a million bucks?" Dwight said in an interview with ProPublica. "Yes. But that's not that much today." Brad attended a public high school, Shawnee Heights, which students at a nearby school sometimes referred to as Scrawny Whites. In Parscale's case, the aspersion was exactly half accurate: by ninth grade, according to a former coach, he was already a sturdy six feet five.

He attended the University of Texas, San Antonio, on a basketball scholarship, then transferred to Trinity University, a nearby liberal-arts school, to study business. Shortly after graduation, in 1999, he moved to Orange County in California to work for his father, who was then the C.E.O. of an animation-software company called Electric Image. The company filed for bankruptcy in 2002, and Brad Parscale returned to San Antonio. Later, in an interview with the Palm Beach *Post*, he recalled visiting a bookstore and asking for the best-selling book in the business section, which turned out to be an instructional text about Web development. At first, he said, "being a good procrastinator, I didn't read it." He got around to it two weeks later, when he was bedridden with food poisoning. "I finished it and thought, I could do that," he said.

In 2005, he founded a Web-development company called Parscale Media. "Brad is a power player in the international web marketing community," his online bio read. Actually, Parscale Media, which was run out of a small office next to a tattoo parlor, mostly produced simple sites on behalf of brick-and-mortar businesses around town—Finck Cigar

Company, Texas Hill Country Landscaping. But Parscale was also open to political commissions. In 2010, he designed a campaign site for Karen Crouch, a conservative lawyer running for county judge, with a slogan in bold type: "Respect for the Victim. Tough Justice for the Criminal." For a far-right movement called My America Again!, an alternative to the Tea Party that billed itself as "a phalanx of self-governing citizens bound by Christ, honor, and patriotism," he built a password-protected site that purported to "harness the power of the Internet" to facilitate a new kind of political activism.

Parscale was also beginning to experiment with social-media marketing, which allowed him to measure, with ever more empirical specificity, where people were likely to focus their attention. In 2010, in an interview with a small Web-development blog, Parscale was asked about a project he'd recently completed for Dury's Gun Shop, in San Antonio. At first, he said, the store's owners weren't even thinking about selling guns online; they'd only commissioned Parscale to make an online catalogue of the store's inventory. Parscale showed the owners how, through search-engine optimization and "great category management," they could find new customers outside South Texas. "Dury's was mesmerized by the amount of hits they were getting from nearly every city in the U.S.," he said. "Once Dury's could visualize the potential business from the new web traffic, they were ready to sell guns."

*Time's* Person of the Year in 2010 was Mark Zuckerberg. The accompanying profile was mostly adulatory. (At one point, Zuckerberg receives a friendly visit from the director of the F.B.I., an otherwise taciturn man named Robert Mueller, who is described as "delighted" to make Zuckerberg's acquaintance.) The piece also notes that Facebook "knows exactly who you are and what you're interested in, because you told it. So if Nike wants its ads shown only to people ages 19 to 26 who live in Arizona and like Nickelback, Facebook can make that happen." The article did not mention that the same sophisticated targeting tools, designed to sort the American population into various micro-demographic segments in order to influence their purchasing decisions, could also be used to influence their other behaviors, including the way they vote.

In 2011, Jill Giles joined Parscale Media as its creative director, and the company became Giles-Parscale, Inc. A respected graphic and interior designer, Giles was "responsible for much of the cool look of San Antonio's chic buildings and restaurants," according to the San Antonio *Current*. Giles and Parscale owned two of the more ambitious Web-design businesses in town, and the merger allowed them to focus on their respective strengths: Giles made everything look good, and Parscale made everything work on the back end.

The company moved to a tonier office across town and took on more lucrative clients—the University of Texas, ExxonMobil, a few real-estate agencies in New York. Giles, like most San Antonians, was a Democrat; Parscale, like most Texans, was a Republican, at least in theory. "I had a mediocre voting history, let's just put it that way," he said later. (Public records suggest that he registered to vote for the first time at the age of twenty-seven.) "Brad was a businessman," Quintin Mason, who was Parscale's college basketball teammate and who remains his friend, told me. "He was savvy, ambitious, all about getting to that next level of success." Once or twice, he continued, "I heard him refer to himself as having libertarian tendencies"; other than that, he said, "politics never really came up."

Around 2012, Parscale was at an IHOP, eating a ham-and-cheese omelette, when he got an e-mail from a woman who worked for the Trump Organization. Trump International Realty needed a new Web site, and she invited Parscale to bid on the project. He did, and, whether by luck or by intuition, he met the main requirement for anyone who wants to win Trump's business: he bid low. As Parscale later told it, Eric Trump, upon receiving Parscale's written proposal, called him to say, "We think you're missing a zero, and we don't know if you're just dumb or you don't know what you're doing."

Parscale got the contract, and it led to more: Trump Wineries; the Eric Trump Foundation; Caviar Complexe, Melania Trump's line of skin-care products. In February, 2015, for fifteen hundred dollars,

ASK ME TO
MARRY YOU,
STEVE

Parscale built DonaldJTrump.com, a bare-bones home page for Trump's Presidential exploratory committee. Four months later, when Trump announced his candidacy, Parscale, this time charging ten thousand dollars, updated and expanded it to turn it into a full-fledged campaign site.

By then, Parscale had mastered the second requirement for anyone who wants to do business with Trump: obsequious public displays of loyalty. Parscale gushed to reporters about Trump's "amazing family," and called working with him "a great honor." He reserved his most fawning sobriquets ("genius"; "truly a loving person") for Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and the de-facto manager of his campaign. In late 2015, according to ProPublica, two Trump-campaign staffers conferred over e-mail about a plan to "transition away from" Parscale's services, complaining that his sites often crashed under heavy traffic. The next day, the decision was abruptly reversed. "We're going to stick with Brad," one staffer explained to the other. "Brad is considered family."

As the campaign expanded, Parscale's approach grew more ambitious. At first, according to an associate of his, "it was just Brad, alone on his laptop, buying Facebook ads"; over time, Parscale, drawing on his close relationships with several Trump family members, especially Kushner, persuaded them to devote more of the campaign budget to online marketing. Trump, who adores television and does not seem to know how to use a computer, was dubious. One day, in Trump Tower, according to the Washington *Post*, Trump loudly berated Parscale for "wasting millions of dollars on Facebook." Pointing to a nearby television, Trump said, "That's how people win elections."

"If you are going to be the next President, you're going to win it on Facebook," Parscale responded. Trump relented, but he didn't seem convinced.

Parscale was despondent—"I hadn't even seen him yell at anyone, let alone me," he told "60 Minutes"—and he walked around midtown for hours, thinking about quitting. Eventually, other Trump family members called to talk him down, and he decided to stay on. After that, Trump either changed his mind or stopped paying attention. Parscale's digital operation kept growing, and the candidate did not stand in his way.

## MARCH 3

The quick
exchange
of emails
between
the former
lovers creates
a soft hole
in the day
and the
night
before. It snowed
but it was
supposed
to be larger &
everything's
closed the streets
are wet
I hear and I
won't
step into
them.

One poem
for today
but no
many little
ones. The coffee
slightly
altered
is good
my bare
feet in
bed ready
to work.
I work
in the field
of dreams
where I
have met
you many
times. I feel
closer, to
you this
morning
and probably
last night
when the
doorway
slightly
opened
because
of our
notes
was flooded
with ghosts.

When I was
young
I liked the
emptiness
of my
home &
now like
it or not
here is
this sweet
accumulation.

The cameras
all that
everything
I do can't
touch
the single
statement
of breeze &
loss & quaint
beauty
things I've
had since
I was a
kid
the secrets
of my home.
I feel con
demned
by this
chaotic
museum
of stuff &
yes I
desire
to photograph
it the
bowls u liked
the cup
u touched
& me in a teeshirt
that used
to be special
& now I
carouse in
bed w myself
in it. I don't
know if
this
will ever
be different
and that
is the
feeling of
this.

I feel like
a tree
the invisible
part of friendship
and drinking
together
and warning.

One empty wall
is the least

Parscale became Trump's digital director in June, 2016. The campaign had its headquarters on the fifth floor of Trump Tower, but Parscale ran his operation from San Antonio, in a makeshift office near the airport. "As far as everyone around town could tell, Brad's whole motivation was: Trump is a big client, and I work my ass off for my clients," an acquaintance from San Antonio told me. "Brad's a competitor. Whatever he's doing, he likes to win." Parscale used an array of online gimmicks to promote his candidate—Snapchat filters, live-streaming on YouTube, fund-raising by text—but he devoted most of his attention to Facebook.

Parscale's operation was unofficially called Project Alamo, a reference to the grisly encounter in a nineteenth-century

I can do
for myself.
Late at night
I enjoy
the brown
pages of a cowboy
show
teevee
on my lap
till practically
dawn
interesting
written
by a gambler

oh I have
so many
shows
one in Florence
one day
you were
taking a shower
I think
I thought
I love
this television

because
it's become
the way
to love
the road
of becoming
is a screen
belonging
on it in
my dream.

The excellent
moments
the man
barges in
and says
do you ever
think
about
film. The poetry
of accident
haunts
like a circus
tent over
my days

and that
fades
and a new
one. I
begin to
write
about dying.
THIS
story ends.
It begins
to be part
of the plot
and do I
love you
for your
distance
from it
or could
I love you
because
you are
close
or your
exciting
difference
so smart.
I love
myself.
The squeaky
little voice
that says
in here
owning the void
and grooving
on it. Voice
over
you're not
so bad
and then
I begin
to work.

My dead
mother
is around
my lover
not far
keeping u
here by
not calling
anyone
is that the tub
in which
I die.

*Weir-doo*
*woo woo*
*woo*

what's that
bird.

because
I don't
have kids
and this
is such
a blessing.

—*Eileen Myles*

border war between Texas separatists and the government of Mexico. Project Alamo soon grew to more than a hundred people, including campaign staffers, employees of the Republican National Committee, and venders from various tech companies. "He ran the 2016 digital campaign the way you'd run any other e-commerce operation," a rival digital strategist told me. "He was selling Trump, but he could have been selling sneakers. He looked at the analytics on Facebook, saw what was popping on a given day, and went, Let's pump money into that and let the algorithm feed it to our audience."

In a post-election interview on Fox News, Parscale said, "For the first time in history, the data operation ran everything, from TV buying"—placing local television ads—"to where we were on the ground." Campaign strategists used real-time analytics when deciding where to send canvassers, where to hold rallies, even what Trump should say at which rally. ("It might be, 'Sir, our Facebook data from this area suggests that people want to hear you talk about tax cuts,'" a person familiar with the campaign operation told me. "Whether he actually took that advice was another question.") The campaign used software to generate an endless stream of ads, each distinguished by one or more tiny variations: a new typeface, a new color, a new aspect ratio, a photo of Trump taken from a slightly different angle. "Certain people like a green button better than a blue button," Parscale said on "60 Minutes." "Some people like the word 'donate' over 'contribute.'"

If each variation is counted as a distinct ad, then the Trump campaign, all told, ran 5.9 million Facebook ads. The Clinton campaign ran sixty-six thousand. "The Hillary campaign thought they had it in the bag, so they tried to play it safe, which meant not doing much that was new or unorthodox, especially online," a progressive digital strategist told me. "Trump's people knew they didn't have it in the bag, and they never gave a shit about being safe anyway." Bernie Sanders, who ran as an outsider with a base of avid support, also campaigned aggressively online, using social media to locate an unprecedented number of small donors. His 2020 campaign has found even more small donors, again largely through fund-raising appeals, which have become so widespread that a video clip of Sanders wearing a formidable pair of mittens and intoning "I am once again asking for your financial support" recently became a meme.

Eric Wilson, Marco Rubio's digital director during his Presidential run, in 2016, told me, "The best online marketers are agnostic, as opposed to prescriptive. Anyone with a lot of money can buy a lot of ads, but what really matters is measurement, because without that you have no idea which ads are having any effect." This sort of measurement is the province of "ad-tech" firms. Clients decide which metrics they want maximized—often some quantitative measure of success on Google and Facebook, which together control about half of the online ad market—and the ad-tech firms optimize for that outcome. In the summer of 2016, Parscale hired two leading ad-tech firms—Sprinklr, based in New York, and

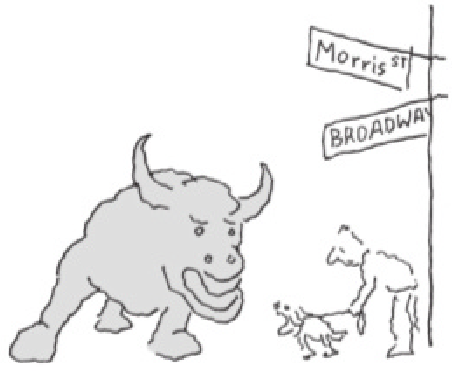
Kenshoo, based in Tel Aviv—to send subcontractors to work for him in San Antonio. Sprinklr also assigned remote employees, stationed in various time zones, to crunch numbers at all hours. In addition to data provided by the R.N.C. and traditional voter files, the Trump campaign had access to a repository of information provided by the Data Trust, a private company that Karl Rove and other conservative bigwigs had established in 2011. There are restrictions that prevent certain kinds of data sharing among nonprofit political entities, but those don't apply to for-profit companies.

According to a source familiar with the campaign, Parscale pitted Sprinklr and Kenshoo against each other, hoping to inspire a "trading-floor mentality." The idea came from Jared Kushner, who got it from his friend Gabriel Leydon, a mobile-gaming entrepreneur from Palo Alto. (Leydon founded Machine Zone, now called M.Z., a multibillion-dollar company known for the popular games Mobile Strike and Game of War.) Parscale, hoping to turn his operation into "a meritocracy," told the ad-tech firms that they would have to compete, and that the winner would earn the campaign's business. Over time, Kenshoo's performance started to lag, and the Sprinklr employees were kept on. Sprinklr, which was valued at $1.8 billion in 2016, now lists several of its prominent past clients on its Web site—Nike, NASA, Nasdaq—but makes no mention of the Trump campaign.

One Project Alamo staffer took several pages of notes during the campaign, recounting the operation in remarkable detail. (The notes have never been published, but they have been shared privately with U.S. government officials.) I reviewed the notes and spoke at length with the person who wrote them, who asked to remain anonymous. "I would draw your attention, first of all, to what's not in them," the staffer said. "They're not, for instance, about how I sat next to some guy named Vlad who had a direct line to the Kremlin." If the Trump campaign was accepting foreign intervention, the staffer was implying, then it wasn't evident in the San Antonio office.

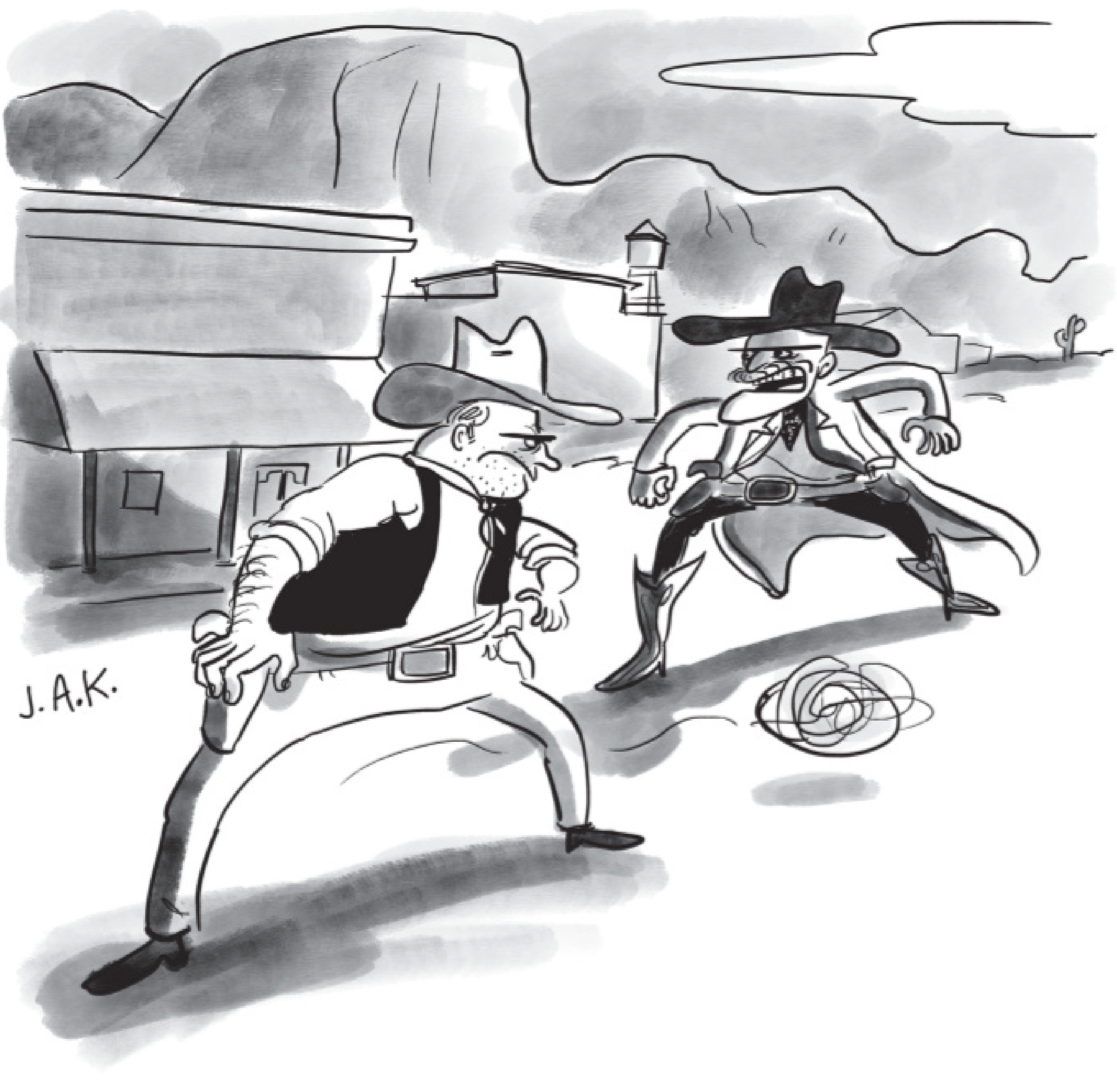
Parscale relied on Facebook to help him accomplish several campaign objectives, including persuasion, fund-raising, and G.O.T.V., or "get out the vote." Finding and motivating likely voters through traditional means, such as TV ads or door-to-door canvassing, is expensive and time-consuming compared with social media. The notes refer to a study conducted on Facebook in which likely Republican voters in early-voting swing states were split into two groups: an experimental group, which was given information about early voting, and a control group, which was not. The experimental group was more likely to be aware that early voting was an option—significantly more likely, for example, in Florida, a state that Trump won by a single percentage point.

Some of Parscale's subcontractors in San Antonio, including a couple of his most trusted advisers, were employees of Cambridge Analytica, the firm best known for acquiring the data of eighty-seven million Facebook users in 2014. Asked about the firm's impact on the 2016 election, the staffer said, "That's another story line that gets blown out of proportion": although some of the Cambridge data was acquired under dubious circumstances, "what they actually did with it was pretty standard data science." When the data breach became international news, in 2018, it incited a wave of public outrage, not least because Cambridge Analytica had a hand in some of the most misleading political campaigns in recent memory: Brexit; Uhuru Kenyatta's disinformation-heavy campaigns, in Kenya; the despotic propaganda tactics of Rodrigo Duterte, in the Philippines. Still, the company's central sales pitch—that its proprietary "psychographic modelling" allowed it to predict each user's deepest fears and desires—is now widely dismissed as snake oil. "There's never been any public evidence that Cambridge Analytica brought anything to the table beyond what was standard campaign practice," Daniel Kreiss, a political-communications professor at the University of North Carolina, told me. In 2016, the Trump campaign paid Cambridge Analytica slightly more than six million dollars. Giles-Parscale was awarded fifteen times more, making it one of the most highly paid venders in political history.



The office culture within Project Alamo was one of brash experimentation—not unlike that of a successful but amoral startup. According to the staffer's notes, all employees, from executives to interns, were encouraged to voice their ideas, no matter how ridiculous. For example, one junior designer, responding to the popularity of Pokémon Go, made a video in which a Hillary-themed Pokémon was being chased—it didn't make much sense, and it had little to do with politics, but it turned out to be a viral hit. Mark Zuckerberg once wrote a manifesto of sorts, in which he encouraged his employees to follow what he called "the hacker way": "Instead of debating for days whether a new idea is possible or what the best way to build something is, hackers would rather just prototype something and see what works." In San Antonio, Parscale seemed to aspire to a similar ethos.

One of Parscale's favorite Facebook marketing tools was called Lookalike Audiences. "I mean, it's why the platform's great," he said in an interview with "Frontline," in 2018. The tool works like this: an advertiser uploads a "Custom List," an Excel spreadsheet of people the advertiser wants to target. Even if the spreadsheet comprises only scraps of information—an e-mail address here, a mobile advertising I.D. there—Facebook, with its unparalleled accretions of consumer data, can usually fill in the gaps. Lookalike Audiences then multiplies the power of Custom Lists, using Facebook's proprietary software to replicate the target audience. If you have a Custom List of three hundred thousand people, Parscale explained to "Frontline," you can use Lookalike Audiences to find another three hundred thousand Facebook users with attributes similar to those in the first group. One of the most difficult tasks of a political campaign—distinguishing likely supporters from the undifferentiated mass of the American electorate—can now be accomplished instantly through artificial intelligence. When the "Frontline" interviewer asked how accurate Lookalike Audiences was, Parscale called it "pretty amazing."



*"Only one of us can be 'the funny one.'"*

Project Alamo staffers also experimented with what are commonly known as "dark posts"—Facebook ads that can be targeted to specific, often small, groups of people. Dark posts were not illegal, nor did they violate Facebook's terms of service, but they were controversial, because they skirted conventions of transparency. In the past, the thinking went, a campaign that chose to run a racist ad would at least suffer blowback from the many nonracists who saw it; in the era of microtargeting, when a racist ad could be served only to people whose online behavior demonstrated a proclivity toward racism, that check was gone.

Two *Bloomberg Businessweek* reporters visited Project Alamo shortly before the 2016 election. Parscale posed for a photo while hunched over his laptop; on the wall behind him were a "Bikers for Trump" poster, a novelty dollar bill with Trump's face on it, and an inspirational quote falsely attributed to Lincoln. Parscale told the reporters, "I always wonder why people in politics act like this stuff is so mystical. It's the same shit we use in commercial, just has fancier names."

In their piece, the reporters quoted a "senior official" within the campaign as saying, "We have three major voter-suppression operations under way." The targets of those operations were said to be "idealistic white liberals, young women, and African Americans." In common parlance, "voter suppression" refers to a narrow set of tactics that are openly racist, unconstitutional, or both (see Georgia in 1960—or in 2018, when its secretary of state was elected governor after purging several thousand people, many of them African-American, from the voter rolls). But the term can also apply to traditional negative advertising intended to dampen enthusiasm for an opponent. Trump's use of such negative campaigning, enhanced by the latest in targeting technology, seems to have helped: if African-American turnout in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin had been as high as it was in 2008, Clinton might have won. (Parscale has repeatedly denied that any such operations took place. "I would actually say we ran the least amount of negative ads I've ever seen in a Presidential campaign," he said.)

Clinton had a budget of more than a billion dollars, a significant chunk of which was spent on TV ads. Trump's campaign budget was more than thirty per cent smaller, but he invested more money in Facebook ads, and those ads cost him much less, on average, thanks to the platform's instant-auction system, which rewards viral success. "A canny marketer with really engaging (or outraging) content can goose their effective purchasing power at the ads auction," Antonio García Martínez, a former Facebook employee, wrote for *Wired* in 2018. Parscale responded to Martínez's piece on Twitter: "This is why @realDonaldTrump was a perfect candidate for Facebook."

Of all the benefits the Trump campaign reaped from social media, surely the most potent came in the form of free human labor. "I asked Facebook, 'I want to spend a hundred million dollars on your platform. Send me a manual,'" Parscale said to "Frontline." "They say, 'We don't have a manual.' I say, 'Well, send me a human manual, then.'"

In June of 2016, Facebook dispatched what is often called an "embed." He was a young man from its ad-sales department who had previously worked for several Republican-affiliated causes. He spent most of the next four months in San Antonio, working with the Trump campaign. Other Facebook employees rotated through the office on a semi-regular basis; Google and Twitter also sent sales reps to the campaign.

"On the commercial side, all big accounts get reps like this," Tatenda Musapatike, a former Facebook sales rep, told me. "It's standard. Coca-Cola gets a Facebook rep, working on commission, whose job is to advocate for Coca-Cola within Facebook, and vice versa." Sales reps were taught that the more useful they were to clients, the more money those clients were apt to spend. "Managers would always talk about 'earning the badge,'" she continued. "As in, you're so tightly aligned with your client that they think of you as part of their team, and they give you a security badge to get in and out of the building." In a 2017 paper in the journal *Political Communication*, Daniel Kreiss and a fellow communications scholar,

BLISS
SURPRISE!

Shannon McGregor, wrote that embeds "go beyond promoting their services and facilitating digital advertising buys, actively shaping campaign communication through their close collaboration with political staffers." (Facebook still offers extensive support to political campaigns, but it claims that this support no longer includes embeds.)

The notes taken by the Project Alamo staffer describe a tense office-wide meeting, early in the campaign, during which Parscale made it clear that he distrusted the reps from Facebook and Google, whose bosses presumably wanted Trump to lose. Shortly thereafter, the Facebook embed demonstrated his value: he designed a Custom List of everyone who had interacted with one of Trump's Facebook pages during the primaries, then sent those people targeted ads asking for donations. The ads cost three hundred and twenty-eight thousand dollars; they raised $1.32 million, a net gain of a million dollars in a single day. After that, Parscale started taking the Facebook embed's advice.

During the election, the embed did his best to keep a low public profile. The day after Trump's victory, Gary Coby, the campaign's digital-advertising director, tagged him in a tweet, calling him "an MVP" of the campaign. The embed was twenty-eight-year-old James Barnes, from Tennessee. He responded to his newfound notoriety by deleting his Twitter account.

Barnes recently told me that, although he grew up in an evangelical family and had long considered himself a Republican, "I despised Donald Trump from the moment I knew anything about him." On November 8, 2016, after spending months working overtime to help Trump win, he and a few Facebook colleagues went to the polls in Washington, D.C., and he cast a ballot for Hillary Clinton. "My attitude during the entire campaign was, I'm a professional, I'm here to do a job, my personal preferences are irrelevant," he said. Last year, "after reflecting on a lot of things, including my personal sense of duty," he quit Facebook. He now works at Acronym, a left-wing nonprofit that is using social-media marketing to try to defeat Trump in 2020. (Acronym is also the main investor in Shadow, the company behind the app that broke down during this year's Iowa caucuses.)

In December, I spent an afternoon with Tara McGowan, Acronym's founder. At one point, she met with Barnes and other staffers, most of them former Facebook employees, in a conference room. They were interpreting the results of a large survey they'd just conducted on Facebook—fifty thousand voters across five swing states—sorting the voters according to dozens of metrics: race, gender, media diet, knowledgeability (measured by whether they knew which party controls the House). This was part of a "persuasion-analytics project" that Barnes is calling Barometer—his attempt to reproduce the power of Facebook's political-marketing tools, now from outside the company. The goal is to gather data on which kind of anti-Trump ad—which subject matter, slogan, tone, and so on—will be most persuasive to each type of potential voter. "If we get even a small percentage of these people motivated to move in our direction, we win," Harry Hantman, an Acronym employee who left Facebook in October, said. I asked McGowan what made her hopeful that Parscale's tools could be turned against him. One of her answers was "James's brain."

In 2016, while Trump was accepting help from Facebook, Google, and Twitter, Hillary Clinton was offered equivalent services, but her campaign turned them down. "In my experience, the reps don't add all that much," a Democratic digital strategist told me. "They may be lovely people, but their job is to sell ads on their platform, and it's sometimes too many cooks in the kitchen." Mike Shields, a Republican consultant and a former chief of staff of the Republican National Committee, told me, "Hillary's people were constantly reading articles about how fucking smart they were, and they let it get to their head. They must have just thought, We've got this, we don't need anyone else. It was hubris."

Parscale spent Election Night in Trump Tower, poring over returns, before finally heading to the campaign's victory party at a Hilton around the corner. At 3:45 A.M., as the party was winding down, he tweeted the word "Digital," followed by "#WINNING." A few days later, he tweeted, "My goal was to show that digital is the future of campaigns. Check."

If Aaron Sorkin ever writes a sequel to "The Social Network," he might set its first scene two days after the 2016 election, when Zuckerberg attended a tech conference at a Ritz-Carlton near Silicon Valley. "The idea that fake news on Facebook, of which it's a very small amount of the content, influenced the election in any way, I think, is a pretty crazy idea," Zuckerberg said during an onstage interview. "Voters make decisions based on their lived experience." But Facebook's business model is premised on the assumption that there is no solid boundary between social media and "lived experience"—that what people see online affects what they buy, what they believe, and how they behave. "For a decade, our pitch to everyone, especially advertisers, was 'We can target the exact people you want and make them behave in the exact ways you want,' " a Facebook employee who is concerned with the trajectory of the company told me. "Then Trump happens, and it's, 'Who, us? We don't have any power, we're just a place to share pictures of your dog.' It was bullshit, but they tried to have it both ways."

After the election, Parscale attempted to promote himself without upstaging his boss or making the voting public feel that it had been manipulated. "What happened here?" Lesley Stahl asked him on "60 Minutes." "You're, like, the secret sauce? The magic-wand person? You're the Wizard of Oz behind the curtain?"

Parscale made a few modest noises, more demurrals than outright denials. "Nah, that's a big statement," he said. "But I— Do I think I played a big role? Yeah."

Shortly before the segment aired, Parscale bought Google ads that would direct people searching for his name to a new Web site, TheParscaleEffect.com. It featured three gruff-looking photos of Parscale, a few bumper-sticker slogans ("Data drives strategy"), and a contact form ("Find out how the Parscale strategy can advance your business's success"). If he was hoping to drum up new contracts without getting into trouble, it seems to have worked. In 2017, he appeared before the House Intelligence Committee, behind closed doors, to answer questions about Russian collusion. He didn't reveal much. ("We got nothing," Mike Quigley, a Democratic congressman on the committee, told Politico.) The Mueller report mentions Parscale only once, citing a retweet of an account called @Ten_GOP, now known to have been the creation of a Russian troll farm. After the report came out Parscale falsely claimed, "President Trump has been completely and fully vindicated by Special Counsel Robert Mueller." Later, when asked whether he'd read the report, Parscale said, "I've read some of it."

Ever since Trump began his longshot candidacy, in 2015, his campaign rallies have given him momentum, press coverage, and an excuse to get out of the house. Since 2016, one of Parscale's shrewdest innovations has been to turn the continuing rallies into data-mining opportunities. Tickets are free, but they can only be claimed by a person with a valid cell-phone number. The campaign now has a huge database of mobile numbers belonging to people who are motivated enough to attend a Trump rally, many of whom might not have shown up on a voter-registration roll or any other official data file.

"We have almost two hundred and fifteen million hard-I.D. voter records in our database now," Parscale claimed last year, although his definition of "hard I.D." is not clear. Even if Trump were banned from every social network, his campaign would be able to reach supporters by text. According to Parscale, the campaign is on track to send "almost a billion texts, the most in history"—and texts are far more likely to be opened than e-mails, social-media posts, or news articles. "We've been working on this around the clock for three years," a senior official who works on the 2020 digital campaign told me. He acknowledged that the campaign doesn't have the same scrappy, subversive energy as in 2016—"It's hard to feel like a total underdog when you have the White House"—but, he added, "we're not slowing down. We're ramping up."

In October, 2019, Thomas B. Edsall wrote a long *Times* column called "Trump Is Winning the Online War," listing several of the "technological advances that have allowed Trump and the Republican Party to leave Democrats in the dust." If money were no object, some of these deficits could be overcome quickly; others might not be surmountable by November. "The Trumpies have been really good at persuasion work—being relentless in hitting their target audience with their messaging," Colin Delany, a digital consultant, said. "That's most effective when you can repeat it over a long period of time."

Last year, the Trump campaign spent far more on Facebook ads than any of the Democratic campaigns. Since January, the trend has been reversed, mostly due to two cash-rich and charisma-poor ringers, Tom Steyer and Mike Bloomberg. Bloomberg is currently building a digital operation that could come to rival Parscale's. His unusually large and well-compensated campaign staff includes Gary Briggs, formerly Facebook's chief marketing officer, and Jeff Glueck, the former C.E.O. of Foursquare. Sabrina Singh, a spokesperson for the campaign, said, "In comparison to Trump's operation, Mike Bloomberg is the only Democrat positioned to compete with him on every single digital platform."

Bloomberg has spent nearly fifty million dollars on Facebook this year, and has given his digital staff an unusual amount of freedom. He wasn't onstage during the Democratic debate in Iowa in January, but his campaign's official Twitter account posted incessantly and absurdly ("Mike can telepathically communicate with dolphins"; "WHAT IS THE BEST PART OF THE BODY TO GET A BLOOMBERG 2020 TATTOO?"). Recently, the campaign paid more than a dozen Instagram influencers, including TankSinatra, FuckJerry, and MoistBuddha, to run pro-Bloomberg sponsored content. Viral stunts like this come at a cost, both in dollars and in personal dignity; and it isn't clear whether the Instagram ads, which winkingly portray the candidate as a stiff plutocrat interested in buying an election, will appeal to the target demographic. But the Bloomberg campaign is an interesting test case: if enough well-placed memes can turn a mediocre hair product or a boring pop song into a hit, then why not a Presidential candidate?

For years, there was no Democrat-affiliated counterpart to the Republican-affiliated Data Trust. In early 2019, the D.N.C. announced that it would partly address this asymmetry, launching an information-sharing operation, the Democratic Data Exchange, to be run by Jennifer O'Malley Dillon, an alumna of the Obama and Clinton campaigns. Before the operation could get off the ground, Dillon left to lead Beto O'Rourke's ill-fated Presidential bid. Since then, the Democratic Data Exchange, which is now run by a Democratic operative named Lindsey Schuh Cortes, has gone unmentioned in the press. An official familiar with the exchange told me, "We are staying small and quiet for now, by design. We're not playing in the primaries, but the goal is to be up and running in time for the general. We hope that all the Democrats who are no longer in the race will hand over their data at that time, but participation will be voluntary." If Bloomberg, a multibillionaire, loses the nomination to Bernie Sanders, who intends to sharply raise taxes on billionaires, it's possible that Bloomberg would transfer the data his campaign acquired to the Democratic Data Exchange, in the common interest of defeating Donald Trump. It's also possible that he would refuse.

At Facebook.com/Business, there are dozens of "success stories": case studies showing how Facebook ads helped a menstrual-underwear company by "broadening brand awareness," or how an artisanal-jewelry company sold bracelets on Instagram. The case studies use internal Facebook data to demonstrate an ad campaign's success through quantitative metrics. One details how the 2014 reëlection campaign of Rick Scott, the Republican governor of Florida, used Spanish-language ads on Facebook to target Latino soccer fans ("*Buena suerte*, Team USA!"). Andrew Abdel-Malik, the R.N.C.'s state director of digital strategy, is quoted in the case study: "Facebook Ads provided us with unique targeting capabilities . . . to reach different sub-groups of Hispanic voters in ways that were simply not feasible on TV and radio." Scott was reëlected by a single percentage point. Four years later, he was elected to the U.S. Senate in a race so close that it triggered a recount.

The case studies can be filtered by industry, using an alphabetical drop-down menu. In 2018, the journalist Sam Biddle, writing for the Intercept, noticed that the Rick Scott case study had been buried, and that the "Government and Politics" category had been quietly removed from the menu. ("Gaming" is now followed by "Health and Pharmaceuticals.") This did not mean that Facebook had stopped selling ads to political campaigns, just that the downside of drawing attention to the fact had started to outweigh the upside. (Facebook has since launched a site devoted to government and politics, with no success stories.) A former Facebook employee told me that, after the 2016 election, there was some internal chatter about drafting a case study that would demonstrate, in great detail, how Facebook had been a decisive factor in Trump's victory. "It would have been one of the most extensive and convincing ones on the whole site," the person told me. "The evidence was overwhelming. But, given the mood at the time, there was no way they were going to put that out there."

In May, 2018, hoping to address concerns about dark posts and other controversial practices, Facebook built the Ad Library, which started to archive all political and issue-oriented ads that ran on the platform from that point on. "In meetings, if you bring up problems like misinformation, you'll hear, 'Well, we have the Ad Library now,'" the concerned Facebook employee told me. "The argument is, 'If we put all the information out there, then people will find it and become better informed'—even though it's clear that that's not actually happening."

In March, 2018, three M.I.T. computer scientists published a paper in *Science* comparing the dissemination of false rumors on Twitter to the dissemination of actual news articles. They found that the fake stories spread faster, in part because they were more likely to provoke an immediate emotional response in users. The same phenomenon appears to hold true for other social-media platforms and to apply to misinformation as well as fearmongering, rage bait, and racist propaganda, all of which go viral more readily than calm, patient deliberation. "Stuff that has a more alarmist and hyperbolic tone, or that makes people afraid or upset, is just going to travel better," the Facebook employee told me. "That fits with human nature, and it's how the platform is designed." Without fundamentally altering Facebook's News Feed algorithm, or the company's underlying business model, this is unlikely to change.

This past fall, the Trump campaign ran a Facebook ad premised on the incendiary but false notion that the villain of the Ukraine corruption scandal was not Trump but Joe Biden. (Parscale repeated such claims several times on Twitter, adding, "The swamp! They're playing us and the media is their lap dog!") The ad, predictably, went viral. Biden's campaign wrote a letter to Facebook, asking the company to take it down. Facebook's head of global-elections policy, a former Rudolph Giuliani campaign official named Katie Harbath, explained that the ad would stay up because the

*"Go on, sweetie—show Aunt Catherine how fulfilling you are."*

platform's rules do not prohibit lying, at least not when politicians do it.

In October, Zuckerberg appeared before the House Financial Services Committee. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez questioned him. "I just want to know how far I can push this," she said. "Could I pay to target predominantly black Zip Codes and advertise them the incorrect election date?" In the ensuing back-and-forth, Zuckerberg clarified that this particular lie is prohibited on Facebook, but that most other lies are not.

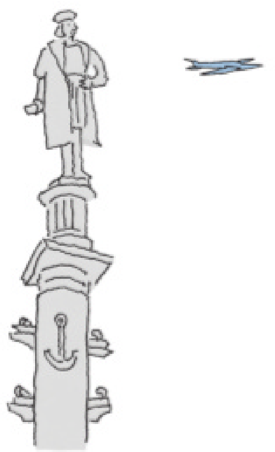
Around the time of this testimony, hundreds of Zuckerberg's employees signed an open letter. "We strongly object to this policy as it stands," the letter read. "It doesn't protect voices, but instead allows politicians to weaponize our platform." The employees suggested six policy changes, all relatively narrow and easy to implement, including "Stronger visual design treatment for political ads," "Restrict targeting for political ads," "Spend caps for individual politicians." Facebook took none of these suggestions. Instead, the company announced that it would "expand transparency," including by adding more search features to the Ad Library.

Soon after, Elizabeth Warren's Presidential campaign ran a Facebook ad. "Breaking news: Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook just endorsed Donald Trump for re-election," the ad claimed. It was a deliberate provocation—a bit of fake news meant to protest fake news. The ad went on to clarify that the eye-grabbing claim was false, then continued: "It's time to hold Mark Zuckerberg accountable—add your name if you agree." The stunt garnered some good P.R. for the Warren campaign; it also enabled her to collect the e-mail addresses of many new supporters.

"There are people on every campaign, in both parties, who know how to use all these tricks," Colin Delany, the digital consultant, told me. "When campaigns decide not to do something—whether that something is microtargeting, or so-called dark posts, or whether it's outright lies or racism—they're making a strategic choice."

"It's lovely that Democratic campaigns are so principled," Tara McGowan, of Acronym, said. "I mean that sincerely. And yet it also scares the shit out of me, because the other side isn't playing by the same rules, and our principles might make it all but impossible for us to regain power."

A few of the most obvious loopholes were closed after 2016—it's no longer possible, for example, to purchase a Facebook ad about an American political candidate using rubles—but many of the bigger ones remain. Yaël Eisenstat, formerly Facebook's head of elections-integrity operations for political advertising, is now a visiting fellow at Cornell. "There's a lot they could do to protect the integrity of the platform," she told me. "They could label paid content as paid, even after people start to share it, which they don't consistently do. They could put a label on every political ad—'This ad has not been fact-checked'—which might encourage some skepticism." Still, political ads make up only a tiny percentage of Facebook's content and less than a per cent of its revenue. It would be much more difficult to fact-check everything that gets posted by every Facebook user, from high schoolers to the President. Eisenstat added, "If the larger goal is to have these platforms contribute to a healthier public square, to leave democracy healthier than they found it, then this is just the low-hanging fruit." In December, 2016, an internal Facebook initiative called Project P—for "propaganda"—found dozens of right-wing pages peddling fake news. According to a recent Washington *Post* investigation, Joel Kaplan, an executive at the company who previously worked in the George W. Bush White House, objected to removing all the propaganda, "because it will disproportionately affect conservatives."



On December 30, 2019, Andrew Bosworth, a top executive at Facebook and a longtime friend of Zuckerberg's, posted a twenty-five-hundred-word "essay" on a private social network for Facebook employees. The text—by turns contrite and defiant, laden with carefully selected statistics and dubious allusions to J. R. R. Tolkien and John Rawls—was later leaked to the *Times*. Its central premise was that social media may be poisonous, but ingesting poison is a matter of personal choice. This was a long way from the idealistic posture of Facebook's official mission statement, "To give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together." "If I want to eat sugar and die an early death that is a valid position," Bosworth wrote. "My grandfather took such a stance towards bacon and I admired him for it. And social media is likely much less fatal than bacon." Bosworth also asked whether Facebook was "responsible for Donald Trump getting elected." He concluded, "Yes, but not for the reasons anyone thinks. He didn't get elected because of Russia or misinformation or Cambridge Analytica. He got elected because he ran the single best digital ad campaign I've ever seen." Of course, what's best for a political campaign, or for a company's bottom line, is not always what's best for the health of a nation.

"No one ever complained about Facebook for a single day until Donald Trump was President," Brad Parscale has said. When the Obama campaign used Facebook in new and innovative ways, the media "called them geniuses." When Parscale did the same, he continued, he was treated as "the evil of earth." Despite the bombast and the false equivalence, this is basically true. Some of the public anxiety over Facebook is a response to how easily it can be abused, but much of that anxiety is about the outcomes the platform yields when it's working as designed. Even leaving aside the Cambridge Analytica data breach and the allegations of foreign interference—even if nobody had ever violated any platform's terms of service—many of the fundamental problems of social media still remain. Creepy surveillance, dissolution of civic norms, widening unease, infectious rage, a tilt toward autocracy in several formerly placid liberal democracies—these are starting to seem like inherent features, not bugs. The real scandal is not that the system can be breached; the real scandal is the system itself. In a sense, it's almost comforting to imagine that the only bad actors on social media are Russian state assets, clickbait profiteers, and rogue political consultants who violate the law. If that were the extent of the problem, the problem could surely be contained. ♦

### ANNALS OF EDUCATION

# TEST CASE

*Prep for Prep and the fault lines in New York's schools.*

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM

A little more than half a century ago, New York City attempted an experiment in a handful of its public schools. In the thirteen years since Brown v. Board of Education, the city's public schools had become *more* segregated. Many black parents decided that hope for their children rested in self-determination rather than in waiting for integration. Under pressure from grassroots groups, Mayor John Lindsay, a liberal Republican, approved a plan to create three locally governed school districts, in which community-elected boards would assume a degree of control over personnel and curriculum.

One of the school districts was in Brownsville, a Brooklyn neighborhood that had once been Jewish and middle class but was, by the late sixties, mainly black and poor. Starting in the fall of 1967, the new Ocean Hill-Brownsville district deëmphasized traditional grading, added curricular units on black identity and culture, and, in predominantly Puerto Rican schools, adopted bilingual teaching. The new arrangement was popular with parents, and was supported by a surprisingly heterogeneous coalition that included Black Power separatists and the liberal Ford Foundation. It was opposed by the United Federation of Teachers, which was largely white and Jewish; the union's leader, Albert Shanker, considered the community-control effort to be a veiled attempt at union-busting. Near the end of the school year, the district's governing board dismissed thirteen teachers and six administrators—nearly all of whom were white, and critical of the new arrangement. Rhody McCoy, the district's administrator, said that "the community lost confidence in them." The union insisted that the dismissals were illegal. Local teachers went on strike. In September, 1968, the strike went citywide.

Gary Simons, the son of a house-painter and a homemaker, had just been hired as a teacher at P.S. 140, an elementary school in the Bronx, his home borough. When the strike reached the Bronx, he was living with a roommate about a half hour north of the school, in the upper-middle-class neighborhood of Riverdale. As the days passed, he noticed that teachers in Riverdale and other rich areas were convening in synagogues, churches, and community centers, continuing to educate their students, albeit unofficially. In the South Bronx, the schools were simply closed.

"That bothered me," Simons said recently. I'd gone to see him in New Milford, Connecticut, where he has lived for a decade, a late-in-life refugee from the city. Simons has a wide face and a John Bolton-like mustache; he had recently had surgery to remove cataracts from both of his cloudy-day-colored eyes. His house is full of glass-enclosed wooden bookcases, in which he keeps a growing collection of hardback first editions of the books he considers to be the most important in the world. The walls are packed with pictures, many of alumni of Prep for Prep, the educational nonprofit that he founded ten years after the strikes. Prep, as its alumni call it, conducts an annual citywide talent search for high-achieving students of color, then administers a battery of exams and interviews. The kids who are accepted by the program agree to spend the summers before and after sixth grade in classes five days a week, and to attend classes on Wednesday evenings and all day on Saturdays during the intervening school year. In exchange, the program secures spots for them at New York's most selective private schools. (The organization's Prep 9 program sends high-school freshmen to boarding schools in the Northeast, such as Deerfield Academy and Choate Rosemary Hall.)

Simons speaks in a nasal and faintly sibilant Bronx lilt, allowing his vowels to accommodate extra syllables mid-thought; sometimes he ascends to a high, gravelly whine when remembering surprise, or

*The program conducts a citywide talent search*

*for high-achieving students of color. Kids who are selected attend extra classes for more than a year, then enroll in élite private schools.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN FINKE

confusion, or anger. Back in 1968, he told me, a few teachers at P.S. 140 decided to break the strike early. "I probably was the only white teacher from the school that went in," Simons said. Among the union's black members, the strike was widely seen as a racist backlash against a brief moment of black empowerment. When the strike ended, in November, Simons said, he was "sort of persona non grata." He and another teacher were assigned to a first-grade class with thirty students. Three of the kids, he quickly noticed, were far ahead of the others academically—almost disruptively so. The teachers eventually put them in a separate reading group. "And then, when we got to a certain point with the three of them," Simons said, his face brightening with the memory, "it was very clear that one was much abler than the other two."

When Simons was young, his father would sometimes come home with armfuls of flowers from the garden of a house he'd spent the day painting on Long Island. On the acre behind his home in Connecticut, Simons tends to a bevy of flowers and bushes and impressively large trees. Now, as he spoke about that talented first grader, he looked a little like a horticulturalist recalling a prize pack of seed. By the spring of 1969, Simons was going regularly to the boy's house to tutor him. The kid sped through the lessons for advanced second graders, and was ready for third-grade reading, but, in the summer, Simons had to return to his own studies, at Columbia Teachers College. When school started again, in the fall, the three advanced students were given reading that was several levels below where they'd left off, on the assumption that low-income kids inevitably slid backward over the summer. Simons was furious—he resolved to make extra efforts on behalf of his especially gifted students. One year, when he was teaching third grade, a "group of about six parents marched themselves into the principal's office and insisted that I be able to take the kids on to fourth grade," he said. A few years later, he shepherded a fifth-grade class to the end of elementary school, and then contacted several prep schools on the students' behalf, assuring the admissions and financial-aid officers that the children would fit right in at their exclusive institutions. Among these students was a son of Puerto Rican immigrants named Frankie Cruz, who would go to Calhoun and Hotchkiss and later become a poster boy for Prep. Simons's lucky discovery of him is something like the program's founding myth.

THE QUIET, SAD, AND DEEPLY RESIGNED CAR

Simons knew that there were bright but understimulated kids all over the city. Maybe, he thought, he could place more of them at schools worthy of their talents—new lilies in the old soil of élite education. In 1978, he secured funds from Columbia and from a Sears in the Bronx, hired a few teachers, and got space for classes at the Trinity School, on the Upper West Side. Trinity's headmaster, Robin Lester, became an evangelist for Simons's mission. "I used to call him St. Gary," Lester told me. Most of Lester's peers didn't see a fresh influx of minority talent as a top priority, but a few younger admissions officials and school heads, shaped politically by the civil-rights movement, were immediately on board. The plan that Simons had outlined for Prep for Prep echoed the approach of A Better Chance, a national organization that was founded in 1963 to help poor black students and now focusses on ethnic diversity without attention to income. (Notable alums include the recent Presidential candidate Deval Patrick and the singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman.) These administrators were part of a vanguard that would eventually establish diversity of this sort—the simple fact of more nonwhite faces in a room—as a preoccupation of their profession.

Simons knew nothing about management, or what it would take to raise money from wealthy people for an annual budget. "To me, a board was a piece of wood," he said. But he had strong opinions about what the kids should learn. He also "had a work ethic to beat the band," according to Dominic Michel, who worked as a deputy to Simons for many years. Simons held staff meetings that stretched into the evening, and he assigned his students piles of homework. When he described the course of study to the admissions director at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School, she said, "Gary, if by the end of the first summer there are four or five kids still standing, pin a badge on each one of them and quit while you're ahead."

I was accepted by Prep in the spring of 1996, at the age of eleven, and my life has, in many ways, ordered itself around this early and somewhat arbitrary triumph: when I was a kid, I did well on a test.

I was a soft and oversensitive only child, afraid of failure. During my first week of classes, I would sit at home, in my makeshift study at the dining-room table, holding my head in my hands, overawed by the amount of work I was being asked to do. The kids I met at Prep were bright and hyperverbal; even the ostensibly cool among them had an obvious nerdiness that they had stopped hiding now that they were away from their normal schools. Rounds of Magic: The Gathering, a role-playing card game, turned gladiatorial at lunch; Tamagotchis—small electronic Japanese toys on which you'd tend to a digital creature—were passed around like samizdat pamphlets. We were a hundred or so of a kind, all humming with the seductive feeling of having been called out from a crowd. Grouped into small units of about ten, and placed under the charge of high-school-age and college-age advisers who'd gone through the program before us, we quickly developed fellow-feeling. What we had most in common were noodgy, hard-driving parents, the type of people who'd push their children to attend supplemental schooling for a year and a half.

Some of my new friends had horror stories about their schools. They talked about walking through metal detectors and sitting through fights in classrooms where there were more than thirty or forty students. That wasn't my experience. I'd been attending a Catholic boys' school in Harlem, where all the students were black or Latino, except for one white kid named Alex, who always looked bewildered. We wore slacks and ties and memorized the names of the books of the Bible. I had to write weekly essays for a class called Literature, Speech, and Writing and recite them aloud. The sweet, stern woman who taught the class judged our performances, on composition and delivery, and gave chocolate to those who did best. When I was in trouble—I was often in trouble—I'd have to stay after school and write some bland penitential sentence a hundred times, until my wrist was sore and the meat of my hand was numb. This was called JUG, for Justice Under God.

At Prep, the only G whose justice we feared was Gary. On many Friday afternoons, at lunch, in the Trinity cafeteria, Simons would stand before us, his mustache hiding his mouth, and rattle off a fresh list of kids who had left or been dropped from the program, because they couldn't keep up. Even more powerful than the fear of dismissal was a kind of wonder at our exotically well-resourced surroundings. Trinity's science labs had smooth tables and deep sinks, Bunsen burners and goggles, powerful microscopes we used to scrutinize slides of our own cells. There was an Olympic-size pool in the basement and turf on the fenced-in roof, both open to us at recess. We were being prepared academically, but we were also being made to understand anew what a school could be.

Our instructors gave us a foretaste of the eccentric and informal adults we would meet at the prep schools where we would later be placed. I studied Latin with a wisecracking Englishman who made constant, morbid fun of Caecilius, the Pompeian nobleman who was our textbook's protagonist. ("*Caecilius est in horto*," we'd recite. "And now," the teacher would say, pantomiming horror at an exploding volcano, "*Caecilius mortuus est*.") The literature curriculum moved swiftly through lighter fare, such as Conrad Richter's "The Light in the Forest" and Maia Wojciechowska's "Shadow of a Bull," to potentially age-inappropriate stuff, like Richard Wright's "Black Boy." I read the latter under the close attention of kids in their second Prep summer, who told us younger ones the pages where we could find the hanging of a kitten and loose bits of racial-sexual reverie.

If you were having trouble in class, you were supposed to ask for a meeting with a teacher. For no reason I can determine, apart from my mother over my shoulder in the dining room—sometimes she'd sit at the computer and transcribe my essays as I spoke them aloud, like a prepubescent Milton—I learned to love the program, and made it through.

Two decades later, on a July afternoon, I visited Trinity again, where a new batch of Prep kids was missing out on a lovely day. Bluish light streamed into the classrooms as if to tease the suckers within. The typical Prep contingent has about a hundred and twenty-five students. They are bused from all over the city to wherever Prep's courses are being held—usually Trinity—and divided into classes according to math aptitude. Every first-year kid takes a period of literature, a period of intensive writing instruction, a period of history, a period of laboratory science, and one or two periods of math. Most also take Latin. I peeked in on a second-summer literature class, where students were talking about Odysseus and his lonely though by no means solitary ramble around the ancient world's mythical-physical map. The teacher wanted to know what the students thought about his character—what it meant when he asked for and accepted help, and whether his virtues in any way mitigated his obvious, trip-extending flaws. Kids piped up one by one, each adding to the class's group portrait of the wave-tossed, homesick man. I recognized the approach: Prep's teachers often use literature to teach something akin to ethics, and to illustrate the values that might be useful in succeeding at, say, a challenging new school. Elsewhere, in a long-standing Prep class called Problems and Issues in Modern American Society, students discussed the carceral state and its effects on black communities.

I saw love and care reflected by each detail in the room: the bright backpacks, the pressed clothes, the manners and the syntax that had been hammered into place by parents anxious about how their children might be seen in the world. (My mother hunted slang and unconjugated verbs as if they were big game.) Like the parents in Brownsville, they had noticed something amiss in the system that was supposed to steward their kids, and they had made a bid for control. I knew how radically these efforts might change one's life: my wife and most of my best friends are Prep alums; much of what I have that is good

*The students take courses in writing, history, science, math, and, usually, Latin.*

I can trace back to the program. The change isn't only personal. No matter the context, certain privileges accompany being thought smart: teachers kindle your ego; people listen when you talk. And, at a mostly white private school, in a society eager for signs of success, each plucked-out black or brown kid carries an unspoken message. With every new way of seeing comes, subtly, a new way to be seen.

There were criticisms of Prep's methods from the beginning. People asked Simons whether it was wrong, in a system marred by disparity, to focus on students already advantaged by their intelligence. This concern made him livid, he told me. "It is precisely these kids who are losing the most, because of the difference between what they're achieving and what their potential is," he said. Simons regarded human intelligence as a special substance that, if left untapped, would sour, and he believed that this was happening all over the country. "He thought, in some cases, that we were producing very gifted criminals," Lester, the Trinity headmaster, told me. Simons studied at Teachers College under Abe Tannenbaum, a pioneer in the identification and teaching of "gifted and talented" children. Each Prep applicant takes an I.Q. test—I remember solving puzzles in a wood-panelled room on the Upper West Side, stressed about my speed. When I spoke with Simons in Connecticut, he frequently, and with obvious relish, launched into tangents about various kinds of I.Q. tests, and about how a stellar writing sample could, in rare cases, trump test scores.

By the time I went through the program, in the mid-nineties, Simons had more or less acclimated to life as a nonprofit executive—and Prep, bolstered by a highly motivated board of directors, was easily raising the money to cover its yearly budget, which had grown to several million dollars. *New York* had put the program on its cover in 1985, along with the headline "The Best Prep School in Town." In 1986, Simons created the Lilac Ball, an annual ceremony for Prep students who have been accepted to college. The event doubled as a large fund-raising gala, and quickly became a fixture on New York's philanthropic circuit.

Simons had also developed what he believed to be his best idea yet: a so-called summer advisory system, which employed older Prep students as mentors to guide younger kids through the first summer, making life easier for newbies and insuring a loyal and motivated body of alumni. To lead the effort, Simons tapped Frankie Cruz, who was about to graduate from Hotchkiss. Cruz headed up the summer advisory system during his college years—he attended Princeton—and then went to work for Prep full time.

By showing how much demand there was among private-school admissions officers for exceptional students of color, Simons established a template. Oliver Scholars was created in 1984, to prepare "high-achieving Black and Latino students from underserved New York City communities for success at top independent schools and prestigious colleges." The Posse Foundation, which recruits talented high schoolers and sends them in small groups to a number of selective colleges and universities, was founded in 1989. An economy was growing, and its chief product, smart black and brown kids, was increasingly visible, if still decidedly outnumbered, on élite campuses. But Simons was restless. He'd envisaged Prep as a simple series of chutes out of poverty and the working class. Now he saw how to make it something more. Each year, Prep kids were being voted class president or head of student government at their schools. "I began to realize that although, initially, my intention was to give these kids a chance because I thought it was just outrageous how the deck was stacked against them," he told me, "these kids were also potentially, like, *national treasures*. And not to have their potential developed is a loss to everyone else." He decided that Prep would become a "leadership development" organization. "I realized that this was a way to raise a lot more money, on the basis that the larger society stood to gain," he said.

In the mid-nineties, Simons called Charles Guerrero, a Prep alum who grew up in the Bronx, went to Harvard, and then moved to San Francisco, in part to start a theatre company with a group of his friends from back East. "Prep had a reputation at the time—sometimes deservedly so—that they only pushed people toward business and law, and if you did something a bit weirder you'd be off their radar," Guerrero told me. Simons, known for having favorites, supported Guerrero's adventure in art. Later, Guerrero became one of Prep's longest-serving employees. He's now the director of admissions at his alma mater, the Ethical Culture Fieldston School.

Simons asked Guerrero to look over his plan for a new leadership curriculum. "I thought it'd be five or six pages, so I said sure," Guerrero told me. Soon, a stack of more than a hundred typewritten pages arrived in the mail. Simons laid out a three-part course of study—which included reading assignments, classroom sessions, movie screenings, and hours-long role-playing simulations—that would identify the "attributes," "ethics," and "tactics" of leaders, focussing on the difficulties inherent in a pluralistic democracy. This curriculum, called Aspects of Leadership, began with a few specially selected students but soon became mandatory for high-school-age Prep kids. For many years, the classes were held at an estate in the village of Wappingers Falls, New York, where kids would stay for three nights at a time, during winter and spring breaks. (Now, to save money, they're held in the city, and have no overnight component.)

The curriculum was an extension of what Simons called the "Prep ethos," which he'd been trying to impart informally all along. In the early days, when the program was still serving a fairly small number of kids, he'd sit them down in a hallway after a long Saturday of grinding work and give motivational speeches, to remind them of the rewards that awaited if they just kept going. One of the signature classes at Prep, on ethics and personal responsibility, is called Invictus, named for the William Ernest Henley poem: "I am the master of my fate,/I am the captain of my soul."

"One thing that I didn't always articulate—but, if you think about it, it's built into the whole fabric—is that I have always been appalled at the whole ethos of victimization," Simons told me. "Because, if you get people to subscribe to it, it's like squeezing all the air out of the balloon. You're taking away the psychic energy that could propel them." When he talked to prospective parents, he made this point again and again. "One of the things we're going to be doing is telling your kids every which way from Sunday that they can do it," he recalled saying to parents. "That whatever obstacles remain"—racial, social, economic—"they can overcome them. If the message you're giving your kid is directly contrary to that, it's too much cognitive dissonance for an eleven-year-old to be asked to deal with."

For some, this emphasis on the individual ability of a handful of students is a fundamental flaw in the program's design. Nikole Hannah-Jones, the *Times* journalist who created the 1619 Project—which marked the four-hundredth anniversary of black people's arrival in the Americas with a multifaceted argument about the persistent effects of slavery and its aftermath—is writing a book about school segregation. She told me that programs like Prep obscure the system's deep inequalities. "They allow us to say, 'If kids really wanted an education, if they wanted to work hard, they could get it. Look at this program! They can apply for this program!'" she said. "And it allows us to sustain all the other inequality and feel O.K. about it, because we've given this very small avenue to this small number of kids who 'wanted it.'"

One summer day, I visited an N.Y.U. building on the eastern edge of Washington Square Park, where an Aspects of Leadership session was taking place. In recent years, Prep has added an extra day to the retreats, called Day 4, during which students design and lead their own lessons. A group of maybe a dozen high schoolers were standing side by side in a wide hallway, participating in an exercise meant to illustrate the workings of privilege. "Take a step forward if your parents own their home," the girl who was leading the exercise shouted out. "Take a step back if your parents don't speak English as a first language." When the exercise was over, the person farthest ahead was Mike O'Leary, a peppy visual artist who helps run Prep's leadership programming and who was the only white person in the room. I couldn't help but imagine Simons rolling his eyes.

Prep was built atop a fault line of American education. In 1778, shortly before he became the governor of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson drafted A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge. In Jefferson's vision, all the free boys and girls in the state would spend three tuition-free years learning "reading, writing, and common arithmetick" and becoming "acquainted with Græcian, Roman, English, and American history." Of the boys in each district whose parents were "too poor to give them further education, some one of the best and most promising genius and disposition" would go on to grammar school. The others—along with all the girls and the nonwhite children—would be left behind. Jefferson's bill gave rise to the Act to Establish Public Schools, which the state passed but largely ignored. It was not until the "common school" movement gathered momentum, in the eighteen-thirties and forties, that public education began, gradually, to take hold. The movement's ideals were most famously promulgated by the Massachusetts reformer Horace Mann, who believed that education could be "the great equalizer of the conditions of men."

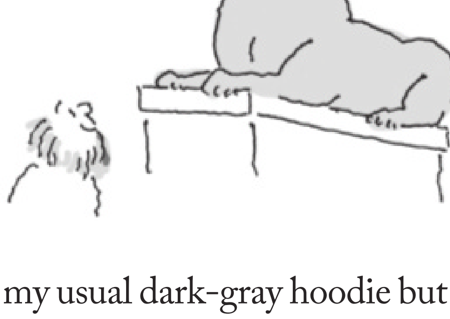
When Teachers College was established, in 1887, it created an experimental school, and named it for Horace Mann. It is now a notoriously exclusive preparatory school that sits on a grassy campus overlooking Van Cortlandt Park, in Riverdale. This is where I was placed, by Prep for Prep, in the fall of 1997. Thanks in large part to R. Inslee (Inky) Clark, the school's Waspy, charismatic headmaster from 1970 to 1991, it had become a much more racially diverse school than it had been just a generation before. In the late sixties, Clark had been the director of admissions at Yale, and had helped establish relatively meritocratic admissions standards there, welcoming a stream of Jewish students and then, increasingly, students of color. He also helped initiate coeducation. Clark signed an agreement with Simons, reserving spots in each seventh-grade class for Prep students. (Several years ago, the *Times* and this magazine reported that Clark, who died in 1999, had presided over a widespread culture of sexual abuse of students. The athletic field at Horace Mann that bore his name when I was there has been renamed Alumni Field.)

Nine other Prep students arrived at Horace Mann with me. There were other black and brown kids already on campus, most of them also from Prep or similar programs. In the cafeteria, a group of tables we collectively called the Middle Table was informally reserved for the darker skinned; we often pushed the tables together and used them to anchor marathon games of spades and rounds of the dozens. We were theatre kids and singers, athletes and library shut-ins, student politicians and social outcasts and "loungies" (vaguely political punks who hung out in the student lounge). I straddled worlds, trying and failing at sports, eventually settling for being the manager of the football team; I sang in the glee club and in the boys' ensemble, flitting around the city in a blazer and khakis, harmonizing under Christmas trees in office lobbies. I performed in musicals, too. One year, I played the villain in "Carousel," a seafaring baritone named Jigger. A very kind white English teacher pulled me aside to make sure that I wasn't worried about the unfortunate rhyme.

At meetings of the Union, Horace Mann's multicultural club, we watched standup specials and satirical movies like Spike Lee's "Bamboozled" and puzzled over how our favorite artists had turned the country's lousy realities into something joyful. Alongside my friends, from a jarring double vantage of privilege and its lack, I came to know America better, and began honing my responses to it. I also left America for the first time: during my junior year, my Japanese teacher led a trip to Tokyo, where I spent a few days with a host family, at whose table I ate profusely, terrified to offend, and spoke stilted Japanese in nervous bursts. The next summer, I went with the glee club on a tour of the Baltics, where we sang Verdi's Requiem in huge churches in Tallinn, Helsinki, and St. Petersburg. I knew, without ever being explicitly told, that this kind of rare experience was just as much the point of prep school as what I learned in any of my classes.

One night, during an after-school concert in the Horace Mann cafeteria, a rumor crept through the crowd. It was the winter of 2000, and we'd all been following the story of Amadou Diallo, a young Guinean immigrant who had been shot and killed—forty-one shots, nineteen bullet wounds—by four New York City police officers; they had supposedly mistaken him for a rapist on the loose. An older boy named Damien, also a Prep kid, a football player with a high, flutelike voice—who, later that year, would be elected student-body president—pulled me outside, into the cold, and broke the news: the cops had been acquitted. We cursed and shouted for a while, then just stood there, backs against the wooden fence that ringed the athletic field, shaking our heads.

My friends were my world, and I realize now that I never thought to hope for more than that. Recently, I had dinner with one of them, a classmate at Prep and at Horace Mann named Chris, who is now a private-school teacher and administrator. The *Times* had just published the first installment of the 1619 Project, and, on a WhatsApp group chat that my high-school friends and I have maintained for years, Chris said that a project like that would have changed our lives if it had come out when we were younger. At dinner, over Chinese food, I asked him what he'd meant. Had we needed our lives to be changed? Was high school tougher for us than it was for others? If I was angry then, or had a chip on my shoulder—a thing I was told more than once; I must have learned the phrase around that time—who could really say why? But, even as I asked these questions, one after another in a quick, strained bunch, I wondered why I suddenly wasn't sure I wanted to hear his answers. Chris raised his brow, looking compassionate but also ready to laugh, and asked me about Halloween during our senior year. I had dressed up by wearing my usual dark-gray hoodie but with a sign strung from my neck that said "The Black Kid Who Stole Your Bike." "You were obviously working through something," he said.



When I talked with Simons about the arguments against Prep when it began, he said people had told him that Prep kids were "going to have lots of problems socially. They're not going to know who they are. You're going to mess with their minds and their sense of identity and blah, blah, blah, blah. I was getting that from a whole lot of liberals. They were a bigger problem, initially, than conservatives."

In January, 2019, a video showing two students wearing blackface and acting like monkeys surfaced at the Poly Prep Country Day School, in Brooklyn. A demonstration ensued; one of the protesters was the daughter of Diahann Billings-Burford, a Prep alum who started at Poly Prep in the mid-eighties, and later served as New York's first chief service officer, overseeing volunteer programs, during Michael Bloomberg's administration. (Bloomberg has been a major donor to Prep and is a onetime trustee.) Billings-Burford is now the C.E.O. of the Ross Initiative in Sports for Equality. "The kids reached a point where they said, 'This is not O.K.,'" she told me. "They were, like, 'This is our school, and if you valued us you wouldn't ask us to feel like this.'" On Martin Luther King, Jr., Day that year, a multiracial group of students wore all black and boycotted classes.

The incident reminded Billings-Burford of her time at Poly Prep. Late in 1986, a young black man named Michael Griffith died after he was beaten by a mob of white men in Howard Beach, Queens. "Some of our white friends were, like, 'You don't understand, it was just where he was, it wasn't a race thing,'" she recalled. "There wasn't a space to discuss these issues." She later became the head of the student government, and, against the wishes of the school's administration, she led a group of students in creating Umoja, Poly Prep's first black-student group.

Jackson Collins, another Prep alum, now serves as the program's associate executive director. He's also the author of a doctoral dissertation about the experiences of students of color in private schools. He surveyed more than five hundred Prep students and measured their happiness according to three variables: "sense of belonging," "emotional wellbeing," and "racial coping self-efficacy and competence"—i.e., how someone reacts in a moment of racial tension. Among older generations, Collins has found, avoidance is a common tactic, but, he told me, "students and their families are much more candid now, much more outspoken."

## HOUSE

Door frames off the square, the inside
sweating tile-brick walls uncovered,
the checkerboard linoleum floors tilted
toward infinity or at least in the direction
of my northern bedroom window, which
in winter is half-frozen with ice thick
enough some mornings to draw on
with a fingernail, while in the dust of
summer the heat though everywhere
fills up the sunburned space with what
my sister calls the angels, who live also
in the attic, no less famous for its stars
and star-like rain that sometimes slips
on through the ceiling into the shy air.

A man standing before his children with
nothing in his hands, the angst coming
down like air the weight of gravity through
the whole length of his body, a lifetime
of falling and slow settling like night fog
or soft rain, as if there were a lake inside
him and above that the cloud-float of
a mind, until a day, like now, the water
rises to the limits of its form: and
it does no good to say that fathers are
the fathers of their own misery, it does
no good to take it all to heart, when
all he is doing is standing there, alone,
in silence, disappearing into himself.

*—Stanley Plumly (1939-2019)*

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A few months before the Poly Prep incident, Prep for Prep, which was celebrating its fortieth anniversary, held a symposium at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in Harlem. Alumni and staff walked through the building's atrium in neat suits, vibrant dresses, and polished shoes; bronze light fell from high windows. People hugged and shouted at one another and flagged down favorite teachers they hadn't seen in a while. The symposium featured panels on education and on electoral politics, and during the Q.&A. portions people got into good-natured arguments and tossed out earnest ideas. Should we form a Prep PAC to support political candidates who share our values? Should we start a school of our own?

Prep's current chief executive is Aileen Hefferren, who was the program's operations director and, later, its fund-raising chief before succeeding Simons, in 2002. She has the efficient mien of a newly elected congressperson—speaking quickly and affably, calling dates and figures frictionlessly to mind, swerving purposefully between budgetary and programming specifics and the program's guiding ideals. For the final session at Schomburg, she spoke with Leslie-Bernard Joseph, then the chair of Prep's alumni council. (He is now the C.E.O. of the Coney Island Prep charter-school network.) During the Q.&A. that followed, a tall young alum wearing a floral shirt and a skeptical look stood up. "I want to know," he began, "whether you feel that there needs to be an ideological shift from a white-supremacist, élitist mentality that Prep is at minimum participating in, if not encouraging or propagating." The crowd quieted, and he went on. Many of the Prep kids he knew and had mentored had a "fraught relationship" with "this Prep identity," he said, "given Prep's relationship with white-supremacy norms."

Joseph, who is black—and who looked, to me, as if he sensed the peril inherent in the question—spoke before Hefferren, who is white, could. "There is an answer you want, an answer Aileen believes, and an answer Aileen can give," he said, suggesting that, rather than making her offer any of those, he would field the question. Then he steered his answer toward a pitch to his fellow-alumni: those who are active in fund-raising and charitable giving can bring about the changes they want to see, he said.

I later tracked down the young questioner. His name is Anthony White. He went through Prep 9, attended Choate Rosemary Hall and Georgetown, and got jobs in finance—first at Barclays, then at Credit Suisse, which has a long-standing relationship with Prep. (A number of Credit Suisse employees have served on Prep's board and have been major donors to the program; the bank frequently hires alums as interns, and many go on to work there.) White told me that he had no love for banking but that the money was more than anybody in his family had ever earned, and that he used it partly to provide financial security for his mother and younger sister. He'd worked as a Prep adviser in the summers and, since finishing college, had continued to mentor Prep students. Many of them, he said, felt torn between their genuine interests and what they felt Prep expected of them.

"A lot of people I know are unhappy with what they think Prep wants their lives to be," he said. "The mission itself is élitist. And when you have a mission that's élitist, and then you use these institutions that are élitist, it's difficult for children or teen-agers to even have a healthy self-esteem. A lot of them want to figure out how they can decide their identities outside of these rarefied spaces."

White had always wanted to be a musician. As he talked to these students, he realized that he couldn't advise them in good conscience if he wasn't living his values. He quit his job at Credit Suisse and used some of his savings to start recording music as well as a one-man podcast about pop culture and current events called "The Black Sublime

Podcast." He now works as a server at a restaurant in Greenwich Village.

"My real question to Aileen," he explained, "was: How are you going to protect the psychologies of these kids?"

A few years ago, the sociologist Anthony Abraham Jack conducted a study of the experiences of undergraduates of color from low-income backgrounds who attend élite private colleges. Drawing from nationwide data and his own research, he found that half of these students are graduates of private day schools, boarding schools, or college-preparatory high schools. The study became the basis for his book "The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students." Class mobility via élite education is not usually an up-from-nothing story. What is more common, in the relatively rare instances of mobility which our society currently provides, is a series of institutional incursions, which lend a kind of jerry-rigged privilege to a chosen few.

Ed Boland worked in Yale's admissions office before becoming Prep's head of external affairs. (He left Prep in 2018.) He first heard about Prep, he told me, during the admissions season of 1989. Everybody had a vague sense of what a prospective Yale student looked like, he said. "They've got grades like this, and scores like this, and attended a summer camp in Maine with a Native American name, and worked at a soup kitchen in France, and had internships at their father's bank," he said. "These experiences are how we have shaped our leadership class for a very long time." He went on, "But, on this particular afternoon in '89, there was this whole crop of kids who had the same kind of Park Avenue pedigree, but with outer-borough addresses. This was not, I hate to say it, your typical 'scholarship kid.' These kids were every bit as strong, and every bit as credentialled—and I'm not just talking grades and scores. The whole package was very Park Avenue." Prep had helped its students not only do well at demanding schools but also signify a kind of social standing. "Prep for Prep is like a stimulus package for an individual," Jack told me. My friends often joke that, instead of a rich parent or a working social safety net, we had Prep.

In 2002, I left New York City for Vermont, to attend Middlebury. There, I learned what a Wasp was. I met kids who had gone to East Coast boarding schools and their analogues in the Midwest and San Francisco. They wore Patagonia fleeces and drank entire glasses of milk at meals. They carried Nalgenes full of water which never seemed to empty. They were friendlier than I knew what to do with.

I also met black kids from other states—North Carolina, Washington, Massachusetts—who belonged to the suburban middle class. We couldn't read one another: they came from families richer than mine, but my education had been tonier. Many of the black Middlebury students who came from New York had attended segregated public high schools in Harlem and the outer boroughs. A few had applied to Middlebury directly, but most had come through programs like the Posse Foundation. (Equality, I was learning, depends so much on mediation, at every step along the way.) These other New Yorkers mostly seemed smarter than I was, but they had not spent the previous several years being initiated into upper-crust education and its folkways. In my early days on campus, I was told more than once, by basically nice white classmates, how much different my speaking voice was from those of the other kids from New York they'd met. What this meant, I knew, was that I sounded, to their ears, sort of white, and that the others didn't.

The academic work wasn't any harder than it had been at Horace Mann, but, by my sophomore year, something in my approach to it had unscrewed itself, fallen loose. I was still diligent about art—singing and doing my best in plays and beginning, tentatively, to write—but, that spring, I stopped going to class, and let late essays pile up. After a flunked semester, I was sent home to New York for a probationary term: I would take classes at Hunter College, part of the City University system; if I earned a B average, I could return to Middlebury. I went home, got the B's, and headed back north. Then I found out mid-semester that I was going to be a father, and I promptly flunked out again.

Twenty years old, frazzled, living with my mother, and in terrifying need of a job, I landed a low-level position at a hospital. On the day I was supposed to start, I couldn't will myself to go. Maybe I was feeling squeamish about the blood and shit that my interviewer, a kind-looking black woman, had taken pains to inform me, in a don't-act-surprised-when-you-show-up tone of voice, would be a constant part of the job. Or perhaps it was the way that she'd said, with something like suspicion, but also with something like concern, "Do you think you're maybe overqualified? I'm surprised you want this job." As if, really, she meant to say, "It looks like you're on a much different path from this one. Keep going."

My daughter was born in the fall of 2005, when I should've been a college senior. I got another job interview, at a well-known education nonprofit in Harlem. The interviewer was tall and heavyset and wore a T-shirt bearing the nonprofit's name in bright letters. As he looked at my résumé, he dragged his eyebrow upward, squinching his forehead into folds. In the summers between school years at Middlebury, I'd worked as a teaching assistant at Prep. "I'm sure that was really nice," he said. "Lotta smart kids." I knew where this was headed. "But, you know, real classrooms—classrooms like ours—aren't really like that. Have you ever broken up a fight? Had a kid curse at you?"

It is an odd feeling to watch yourself be seen—or, worse, read. I was being interpreted, reasonably but not totally accurately, according to the schools I'd gone to and the kinds of jobs I'd had. I didn't feel like a member of the class to which my education said I was someday supposed to belong. I felt like what I was: young, black, jobless, an unmarried father. I wanted to tell those interviewers that I was afraid.

Then Prep stepped back into my life. Luck. A stimulus package. I got a job at the program's headquarters, a brownstone on West Seventy-first Street, shuffling papers in the basement. The job required focus, bureaucratic speed, and an ability to communicate regularly and clearly with a Prep administrator whom I'd known since I was a kid. I was not good at this job. Piles of paper turned my desk into a model skyline. Information went unfiled, spreadsheets unfilled. Whatever I'd learned at school, it hadn't been this.

So Prep recommended me as a tutor for the teen-age son of a black investment banker who was on Prep's board of directors. The banker paid me directly, by the hour, and I sent him occasional e-mail updates on his son's progress. We read plays and short stories and articles from the sports pages, and ran through long sets of simple algebra. The kid didn't like to concentrate; I could relate. One day, I got a call from his stepmother, who was from Chicago. She was supporting a young Illinois senator who was preparing to run for President. His campaign was setting up a fund-raising office in New York, and they'd need an assistant. I knew that I was stumbling into another unmerited adventure. Without having finished college, I rode the first Obama campaign all the way to Washington, D.C., where I worked at the Democratic National Committee, raising money, and then at the White House, where I helped recruit minor functionaries to work at Cabinet agencies. On Friday evenings, I'd throw clothes into a duffel and catch a BoltBus home to hang out with my daughter—and to spend most of each Saturday on the Upper East Side, pecking away at a degree from Hunter College.

THIS WOULD MAKE A GREAT JIGSAW PUZZLE...
C.C.O.'B./ARROYO

I had run up student-loan debt at Middlebury, and I was paying my way through Hunter credit by credit, up front and in cash. Some semesters, out of fatigue or because I was flat broke, I gave up school entirely. Once or twice, I convinced myself that I should quit, that I'd made a fine beginning for myself—unreasonably fine, given the circumstances—as a college dropout. But something about the difficulty of this arrangement, and its maddening slowness, helped me focus. At Hunter, what I learned, I learned well, and in a hungry way I hadn't really experienced since high school. It was the first time since fifth grade that I'd attended a public school. I wasn't advancing anyone's notion of diversity. My classmates were New Yorkers, and therefore from everywhere. Everybody had at least one job, and lots of them had two or three. Nobody strolled across a quad to class—Hunter has no grass—and everybody was always on the train. Many of my teachers were adjuncts, shuttling between one city campus and another; they managed, mostly, to project total sincerity about the subjects at hand. Nobody complained when, lacking a babysitter, I sometimes brought my kid to class. Nothing depended on my presence. I didn't signify.

One professor, a white woman with graying hair who wore a series of rumpled shirts, wept while recounting the events of the twenty-fourth book of the Iliad. By the time she finished, my eyes were puddling, too. I studied the Hebrew Bible with an instructor in his seventies who tape-recorded each of his digressive lectures, intent on one day turning them into a book. A garrulous Southerner taught me early American literature: Winthrop, Edwards, Mather. A fastidious graduate student with a sideline in editing technical manuals taught a seminar on Japanese cinema and another class focussed solely on Kurosawa; I took both, and now, rereading my essays for those classes, I can see that I was starting to learn how to make my close readings bearable as prose. When I finally graduated, at a huge, happily impersonal ceremony at Radio City Music Hall—Chuck Schumer was the featured speaker—I was living in New York again, writing speeches for minor executives at an N.G.O., a few months away from turning thirty. "Twelve Years an Undergraduate," I joked with my friends.

Gary Simons stepped down as Prep's director shortly before I first left for Middlebury, in 2002. His ouster registered as an earthquake among the alumni, who regarded him both as a father figure and as a remote, eccentric guru. Simons had long presented himself as a kind of educator-saint, and his air of extra-professional intensity had started to wear thin with the board. He had insisted on involvement in every aspect of Prep's operations—including maintaining personal relationships with students, which the board found inappropriate but Simons felt was intrinsic to his work. Although Simons was in tune with the individualism of the age, his shambly persona, tendency to micromanage, and allergy to compromise put him out of step with the era's technocratic drift.

"By the end," Peter Bordonaro, the longtime director of Prep 9, told me, "he was sort of impossible to deal with." A stocky seventy-five-year-old with a dark mustache, Bordonaro, who left the program six years ago, has a philosophical air but speaks with the blunt diction of a lifelong teacher. He is a beloved figure among Prep alumni. We met on a cool day not long after Christmas, at a diner in the West Village. He told me that he's tried not to obsess over Prep since he left, and that he was working on a memoir of his time in Vietnam. He recalled a day, in 1999, when Simons charged into his office and presented him with a memo titled "Prep

*"Will my tone come off as mean if I don't use an exclamation mark?"*

• •

for Prep in 2000." In it were ten brief—brief for Simons—ideas on how Prep should adjust to a new millennium. One was a plan to focus on young Latino immigrants. "He wanted to find the kids, give them a year of English-language training, and then have them start the preparatory component," Bordonaro said. These days, I noted, a program like that would register as a fairly unsubtle rebuke of the Trump Administration. Would that play well at private schools? "And the fund-raising—Prep's always had to avoid seeming partisan," Bordonaro said.

After leaving Prep, Simons almost immediately started a new nonprofit, Leadership Enterprise for a Diverse America, which, among other things, searches the country for exceptional high-school students in under-resourced communities and helps them gain admission to prestigious colleges. The program is not restricted to students of color; typically, about a tenth of the kids are white. (Simons stepped down from LEDA after just a couple of years, because of medical problems.)

Hefferren was, in some ways, an obvious choice to replace Simons at Prep. She knew the program well and had an extensive background in fund-raising. The educational landscape in New York was shifting: the year that Hefferren took over Prep, Bloomberg was elected mayor, and assumed unprecedented control of the school system. He closed schools, opened smaller ones, and implemented a program of "school choice," in which city residents could apply to attend middle and high schools across the city. He also encouraged the growth of charter schools. Nominally public entities, charters are often run and partially financed by private boards of directors; they can hire non-union teachers and can recruit from a broader pool of students than traditional public schools can. They can also, crucially, craft their own curricula. Some of the donor money that once flowed to Prep began drifting toward those institutions. Philanthropists tend to swim in tight schools, often under the influence of a small group of paid charitable advisers. Ed Boland told me, "Now we often hear, 'I'm very attracted to how successful your program has been, but I'd rather support public schools.'" Prep's budget is now thirteen million dollars; its partner schools offer more than thirty-five million dollars in financial aid to Prep students annually.

This past fall, Leslie-Bernard Joseph—whom I'd seen talk, a year before, with Hefferren at the Schomburg Center—received Prep's annual Alumni Prize. He accepted the award at a private ceremony for generous donors, and took the opportunity to make an announcement. "Prep cannot say with integrity that it fulfills its mission until it has diverse executive leadership that reflects the communities it serves and represents," he said. "What got us here will not get us through." He said that he wanted the five thousand dollars that came with the prize to be used to help fund the search for a new chief executive.

Hefferren, approaching her twenty-fifth anniversary with Prep, had, in fact, already submitted her resignation to the board. Less than a month after the donor ceremony, she announced that she would step down in the summer of 2020. The time had come for "Prep's next chapter," she said, in a statement, and for her "to explore life outside of Prep." I spoke with her shortly after her announcement, and asked what that next chapter might be. She reiterated the value of Prep's current mission. "Not so long ago, people were thinking about, you know, have we reached a post-racial society," she said.

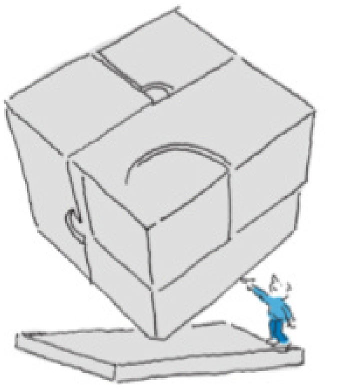
"And I think that in the last couple of years people are saying, 'Now, more than ever, Prep for Prep's work is vital.'" The board's search for a new chief executive, led by the firm Spencer Stuart, is under way.

In January, I called Joseph at his office in Brooklyn, to ask what he thought of Prep's future. He'd said in his speech that "Prep's mission has never been about just getting us into private school," and I asked him to elaborate. "We got really good at this one thing, and that became who we are," he said. "Companies that get really good at one thing tend to fall off the face of the earth when they don't change with the times." Maybe the organization could begin to branch out—by, say, selling Prep's curriculum to failing school districts and helping them to implement it. Prep, he seemed to be saying, was too small: the organization needed to help more kids, even if it did so in different ways. Perhaps it could reach beyond New York, and perhaps it could reach those who aren't scooped up in its talent search. It's not enough to promote a "talented tenth," Joseph said, referring to W. E. B. DuBois's notion that "the Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men." He added, "Our success alone does not open any doors."

Forty years after the 1968 strike, the middle school where it began, J.H.S. 271, was closed by Bloomberg, for poor performance. The building is now home to three separate schools, including the Ocean Hill Collegiate Charter School. During Bloomberg's tenure, New York's graduation rates improved, but segregation deepened—the city's public schools are as segregated now as they were under John Lindsay. In the interim, millions of black children have passed through the system, some served well enough, others hardly at all, none of them ever able to simply assume that the education offered to them by their government would prepare them for the wider world. (A school-desegregation plan that includes a proposal to abolish "gifted" education is being considered under New York's current mayor, the liberal Democrat Bill de Blasio.)

We are all embedded within systems, but each life—each child—is an unrepeatable anecdote. According to the adults I knew when I was a kid, the worst thing in the world was to be a "statistic," subsumed into a mass of low expectations and bad outcomes determined by color and class and sustained by a bureaucracy that was, at best, inept and, at worst, intractably racist. Education, then, was triage; escape was a higher-order concern than reform. Parents murmured about how So-and-So had got her daughter into Such-and-Such school, and had spirited the kid away from a school system whose failures symbolized—and, in many ways, flowed out of—a larger set of brutal social facts.

Before her announcement, I asked Hefferren whether Prep, by its nature, helps to keep broader inequalities intact. "We're going to help create principals, superintendents, education commissioners—people who are going to really change that system," she said. Among Prep graduates, education is the second-most-popular field of work. Is it their—is it our—responsibility to change the system now? Are we succeeding? When I spoke with Nikole Hannah-Jones, she criticized Prep's philosophical orientation, but also told me that she does not begrudge the choice some black parents make to send their kids to such programs. "The onus of fixing the system" should not fall on them, she said.



I thought of conversations I'd had over the years with all the Prep alums I know, about what the program had and hadn't done. One friend, a fellow Horace Mann graduate and a son of Nigerian immigrants, who now lives in Amsterdam and is perpetually astonished at the thick web of public services there, told me, over dinner near his home, "If Gary Simons had devoted his life to single-handedly turning around the whole system, he'd have died (a) sooner and (b) without having changed that much." And here we were, two kids from nothing much, gently arguing over dinner at a bistro across the ocean from where we grew up. Another alum pointed out to me, at a birthday party, that her son was only a generation removed from the material want she had known, and two generations from the Haiti her parents had left. Yes, it would be good for well-off people to send their kids to public schools, she thought. But, no, she couldn't afford for the "experiment" to start with her son.

To be educated is to be subject to a series of experiments. When Simons was planning the lessons for Aspects of Leadership, he considered adding a section focussed specifically on politics, which would have been reserved for the students who had taken most ardently to the curriculum. These superbly trained young people could go on, he thought, to fix the society-wide problems that had made Prep necessary. The course was never implemented at Prep, but Simons later incorporated it into LEDA. Simons remains a close observer of national politics: on an e-mail list and a blog that he updates more than once a day, he regularly shares thoughts in support of his preferred 2020 Presidential candidate, the unusually bookish thirty-eight-year-old Pete Buttigieg, a graduate of Harvard and Oxford.

In January, I attended an open forum of Prep alumni, held by the search committee that will choose the program's new chief executive later this year. There was a nervous mood in the room, less about the future leader than about the existential issues that the change represented. What, exactly, made Prep different from other similar programs? And now that private schools, on their own, without nonprofit intervention, seek out nonwhite students, starting in kindergarten—often from affluent families—what exactly was the program's role?

Prep has more than three thousand alums now, many of whom are in their forties and early fifties, with their own children to agonize over. One of them, a father of two, spoke up. "All of us have to make that decision," he said. "Am I going to send my kids to the same place I went to?" It was one in a series of rhetorical questions. The representative from the search committee wrote it down. ♦

# NIGHT SWIM

### *Anne Enright*

PHOTOGRAPH BY SAM CANNON

She was driving Ben to a friend's house, and this added journey was the cause of some irritation in her day; she had too much else to do. Though she did like the privacy of the car, the feeling of his voice coming over her shoulder as she checked the mirror and slowed to make a turn. He was up on the booster seat—Ben was small for eight—and he looked out the window at suburban streets and parked cars, while she used his mobile phone to map the route. She had it down by the gearshift, propped up on the gray plastic fascia. It was hard to read the little arrow through the disaster of Ben's cracked screen—the thing was rarely out of his hand, unless he dropped it. Now he looked out on the real world as though mildly surprised it was there.

"I don't like Barry McIntyre," he said.

"No? Why not?"

They had their best chats in the car. If they'd been at home, he would have said, "Dunno," or "Just . . ." In the car, he said things like "I like boys, though. I do like boys."

"Of course you do."

She wondered why he couldn't speak when they were face to face. What was it about her eyes on him that made him shrug and shift under his clothes?

"You are a boy."

"I know that," he said.

Of course, she was his mother, so when she looked at him she was always checking him over to adjust or admire. Though she tried not to. She really tried not to turn into the kind of woman who said, "Sit up straight," or "Leave your hair alone."

"Well, then."

She glanced at the rearview mirror and saw only the side of his head. His coarse hair was darkening through the winter. In a year or two, it would be fully brown.

"I just hate basketball."

"Do you?"

"I really do."

Recently, he had used the word "gay" as an insult. "That's so gay," he'd said at dinner, and his little sister missed a beat.

"Of course you like basketball," she said warmly. That lie.

He did not answer.

"Does Barry McIntyre play basketball?"

In the rearview mirror, she saw his hand move toward his hidden face.

"Leave your nose alone!" she said.

It was hard not to. They were so temporarily beautiful, her children. They were so perfect, and then they were not perfect. She loved them too much to let them be.

She drove on while he watched the Dublin suburbs: spring trees, semi-detached houses, a bundled old citizen walking her dog. The phone app was taking her down a familiar street, though it was an unfamiliar route, one she would not have known to take herself. Ben's friend was called Ava, and she was new. She lived in St. Clare Crescent, which was somewhere near the motorway, apparently. But they did not take the motorway; they took a network of small streets, some of which she had driven down before—this was the way to the garden center, that was the way to the dog groomer's—without knowing that you could cross from one to the other if you turned at the right place.

"Would you rather?" Ben said, then he stopped.

If you did not let Ben know that you were listening, he would refuse to continue.

"What?" she said, finally.

And, now that he knew he had her full attention, he said, "Would you rather drink a cup of lava or be drowned in a lava lake?"

"Oh, Christ."

"Would you rather?"

"Not this again."

"Which?"

"You can't drink lava."

"Yes, you can."

"In a cup?"

"A stone cup."

"I'll take the lake."

"Would you rather fall off a roof or have a tree fall on your head?"

He was obsessed with choices, especially impossible ones.

"Neither. I would rather neither of those things happened to me."

"Would you rather fall off a roof," he insisted, "or have a tree fall on your head?"

Maybe he was obsessed with death itself. There was no getting out of it, one way or the other.

"Roof," she said.

"O.K."

"What about you?"

"Yeah, roof," he admitted.

"Not your best," she said.

He paused, took the challenge.

"Would you rather be stung to death by fire ants or strung up by your toes from a big crane until your head burst?"

"Lovely!"

He would keep going until she was completely stuck.

"Crane, please."

"Would you rather drown in the dark or be strangled in the dark?"

He would keep going until she was actually dead.

"Seriously?"

"A huge dark lake full of eels."

"Really not. Absolutely not. I would not rather."

She was taken, as she drove, by the memory of a night swim, many years before Ben was born. It was in a lake, in the Irish countryside; a gang of them coming back from the pub, no moon, no sex, at a guess—not that morning, or the night before, when they were supposed to have their holiday-cottage sex—and she pulled her dress up over her head as she made her way, in the darkness, toward the lake. Of course there was a man in the group who was not, actually, the man she was seeing at the time; he was some other, forbidden man. And neither of these men would later become the father of the boy now sitting in the back seat. Getting naked in the deserted woodland in the middle of the night was a taunt to both of them—either one would do. It was all a long time ago.

The dress was a blue linen shift, loose and practical, her underwear possibly quite fancy and impractical in those days before booster seats and children with sleepovers and phones that told you which way to turn. Her body also a finer thing, back then, if only she had known it. And she was drunk, so the pathway down to the little boardwalk was patchily remembered, her experience at the time also patchy, though it slowed and cleared when she dropped her dress onto the still-warm wood and looked out over the water. There were turf grains in the silk of it that turned the lake brown, even in daylight. Now, at midnight, it was darker than you could imagine, so it was like a sixth sense, the feeling of open space in front of her. When she looked down, she saw the blackness gleam, like oil. She sat at the dock's edge to unclip her fancy bra and shrugged it off. A man's voice telling her to stop. Another man saying nothing. A woman's voice, saying, "No, really, Michelle." And she was in. She pushed out from the wooden lip as she dropped down into it, was swallowed in a bang of water that turned to a liquid silence, then she struggled back up to where the air began. Black water into black air.

As she rose and turned, she could feel the alcohol swell under the surface of her skin, and the water was not so much cold as numb. Or she was numb. The water slipped past her as she hauled her way through it, in a long, reaching overarm that took her away from everyone, even as she seemed to stay in the same place. She could tell by their voices that she was moving—the fragments of sound she caught as she plowed along the surface, out toward the center of the lake.

If it was the center. If it was even the surface she was swimming along. It was so dark and wet that it was hard to know if her eyes were closed or open. She was afraid that she was not quite level, as she swam, that she was tilting downward, afraid that when she turned her face up to inhale she would find only water. The shouts from the bank were more sporadic now; it was as though they had given up on her as she circled or tried to circle back toward them, because the scraps of sound gave her a sense of horizon and it was important not to lose this. She needed to know which way was up. She pulled the water along the sides of her body, and though she twisted into it as she went, she was not sure that she was making the turn. She should just stop a moment and get her bearings, but she could not stop; she did not want to. It was—this was the secret, sudden thing—so delicious. Not knowing which way was which, or where the edges were. She was dissolved by it. She could drown right now and it would be a pleasure.

She caught a flash of her white arm, a sinewy gleam that she followed—her body its own compass—until she heard, on the bank, the voice of the man she was supposed to sleep with, saw the intermittent cigarette glow of the man she was not supposed to sleep with (and never did, for some reason; perhaps she had him fully spooked). Her big statement was a little undercut, in the shallows, by the sharpness of the stones in the silt under her feet as she made her way up out of the lake, toward recrimination and cold-skinned sex.

She woke up the next morning with a start, the previous night's slightly watery consummation already forgotten, wasted. It had happened without her. She sat on the edge of the bed and pulled air into her lungs. She was alive. And she put this fact into her mind. Jammed it right in the center of her mind. She could never do that again. She was twenty-four years old, and she was giving up death. Drunk or sober, there would be no more lakes after dark.

"You know, Ben, you should never swim at night," she said now, more than twenty years later, sitting in her Hyundai hybrid. Accelerator, brake, mirror, clutch.

"Would you rather?" Ben said.

"No, really, you have to promise me not to do that, ever. Not in a lake, because there is no salt in a lake to hold you up, and especially not in the sea. You must always respect the sea. It's bigger than you. Do you hear me? And you must never, ever swim if you have taken alcohol, or even if your friends have. If a friend has had a couple of beers when you are a teen-ager and he says, 'Come on, it'll be fun!,' what do you say?"

"Would you rather," Ben said, patiently.

"No, I wouldn't. I really would not rather. I would not rather die one way or the other way. What is your problem, Ben?"

They were in a street of newly built semidetached houses, depressingly small and endlessly the same. Tiny gardens: rowan tree, cherry tree, silver birch, ornamental willow—a horrible pompom on a stick. She did not know what she was doing in this place. It was coming to catch her, even here. It was coming to catch her children—her own foolishness; it had followed her out of the water. The night swim was not the end of it; she had been in thrall to death for some time afterward—months, a year. Because of course you could leave the lake but you could not leave desire itself, and all its impossibilities.

Though something was made possible. Something was made real. Something was resolved by the existence of the child in the back seat.

"Would you rather," Ben said, "live in a turkey or have a turkey live inside you?"

"What?"

"Would you rather," he repeated, in a forbearing way, "live in a turkey or have a turkey live inside you?"

"That is a very good question," she said.

"Would you rather?"

"That is a truly great question. That is the best one yet." She reached to the car radio and switched it on, hoping to distract him.

"Is that the place?" The app told her to take a right. "Is that where Ava lives?"

"I don't know."

"She's your friend."

"No, she's not. She's not my friend. She's just really, really pushy." His hand rested, in anticipation, on the overnight bag beside him as she took the turn through large, open gates into a new development.

"Is this it?"

St. Clare Close, St. Clare Court. The little maze was set around an open green space, and in the center of the green was a grand, three-story building.

St. Clare's itself.

There it was. All this time. She had lived five miles away from here, for a decade, and had never realized it was down this road, one she passed every so often, on her way somewhere else.

She had been driven here in a taxi nearly twenty years ago, when all around were green fields. She was terrified that the driver would know from the address that she was mad, though she wasn't properly mad; she was just quite badly broken. She was sure he would know that there was a broken human being in his cab, that he would turn to sneer at her as they went through the gates, or as they were going up the driveway past tended gardens, to this large house, this facility.

The Sisters of St. Clare and St. Agnes. Private Nursing Home.

"Scraggy Aggy's," as it used to be known. The bin. She had typed the address into her son's phone and thought nothing of it.

"Would you rather?" Ben said.

So that was why she had remembered the lake.

It was very strange, looking at the building from the outside. She had spent her time there in a small room and had seen the exterior perhaps twice: first in a skewed way, as she walked up the steps, and possibly once again in a backward glance when her father came to collect her. She had never gone into the gardens, which were now filled with smart new houses; it was possible that she had not been allowed. Or, more likely, she had not been supplied with clothes. She had slept a lot, or lain unmoving in her hospital-style bed. She did remember standing at a window—perhaps it was even that window on the third floor, where the building bulged out into a fat, round turret. She knew that the turret contained a flight of stairs and that she had looked out from the top of it, as a woman in a fairy tale might—though she was not in a fairy tale, she was in a fog of Mogadon, not to mention all the other junk she swallowed obediently, twice a day, wondering if she would ever, ever shit again. Nobody seemed to care about that. They cared about your feelings instead. Though "cared" was perhaps the wrong word. They observed your feelings.

"Mother," Ben said—a word he used only when truly annoyed. She had forgotten to say "What?"

"What?" she said.

"Would you rather live in a turkey?"

"Is this the place?" she said. "Is this where she lives?"

She had slowed to a stop in the middle of the deserted street. A pair of tiny children, one of them just a toddler, were playing on the flight of broad granite steps that led up to the front door of the building that used to be Scraggy Aggy's. The place had been turned into apartments—they probably cost a bomb. Other things came back to her as she looked at the façade: A foyer of sorts, where she had signed in. A large living room for the nuns, where her father had stood up from a chintz armchair as she walked through the door, ready to go home. It was the high-ceilinged room on the left, where the children's mother had pinned the curtain back, to see that they did not wander far.

There had been a godforsaken day room where people went to smoke—she wondered where that was. They were all on twenty cigarettes a day, the broken ladies of the suburbs, with their trembling hands and their pretty dressing gowns. They'd sat in this stinking room, with its vinyl-covered armchairs, and looked at their wrists. She wondered who lived in that space now. Someone busy and young. Someone who put orchids on the sill of a window that had once been nailed shut. This person did not smoke. This person walked out of a lovely private flat into the public corridor where the sad people used to pace, all those years ago. Weeping, not weeping, silent, eying the pay phone.

"It's No. 74." Her son's tone was one of bottomless contempt, and she saw that she had not moved, was stalled.

The toddler and the young child were actually contained by the steps, she realized. They stayed at the top, and peddled their tricycle on the flat surface. They did not approach the edge.

She had spent the past eight years of her life checking on the safety of small children.

The car rolled gently forward as Ben read out the numbers on the houses that faced onto the green: 67, 69, 71.

"Where are the evens?" she said, as they circled slowly around the back of the building as though driving into a trap. This is how her life had felt, just before it broke—everything had been too connected. And now it was happening again: the unwitting journey, the unfunny choices, the idea that her son knew, of course he did, you could smell it on her still: the brackish water of the lake.

She spotted the window of the day room, up on the second floor, and she was still up there, checking her wrists. Smoking away. Staring for weeks at a patch on the wall. Ben unknown to her. Her daughter unknown. They had not happened inside her body; they had not been born.

"There it is! Seventy-four, seventy-four!"

She stopped the car, pulled the hand brake, and twisted in her seat to look at her son, who was undoing his seat belt in the back. Ben glanced up at her, and he was beautiful. His hair needed a comb, and there was a gleam of something under his nose, but he was so very much himself. He looked at her from under long lashes, as though he had known her for a long time, and she was not inside the building. She was here now, on the outside, with him.

"Be good," she said, as he grabbed the overnight bag and was gone. For a boy who didn't like girls, he was quick getting to Ava's front door.

"I'll pick you up at eleven tomorrow."

He came doubling back then. She thought for a moment that he wanted to kiss her goodbye, but he was just looking for his phone. She handed it through the window, then stuck her face out after it, for mischief.

"Mnnnnmm," she said, puckering up. And he did kiss her, abruptly, before running back to the house, where Ava was now standing on the porch to welcome him in. A little blond pixie, with a sequinned heart on her T-shirt, jigging up and down at the sight of him.

The kiss was a clumsy thing. Fleshy. Swift. There was a dot of cold on her cheek, from the tip of his nose.

"Ben!" she shouted. "Hang on. Ben!"

"What?"

"I would rather have the turkey live inside me."

"O.K.!" He took her answer quite seriously.

"No contest."

It was just a question, she thought. And she checked the rearview mirror before pulling out. ♦

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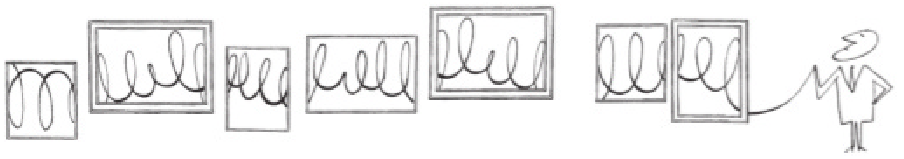
Anne Enright on rupture and repetition.

# THE CRITICS



### POP MUSIC

# A WORLD OF POSSIBILITIES

*On "græ," Moses Sumney rejects classification in favor of knowing one's self.*

### BY HUA HSU

When we're young, a love song can seem like a beacon. It translates the mystery of feeling—the erratic moods and palpitations associated with growing up—into the stability of language. Pop music is built on these pithy excavations of fantasy and desire, even as this actual thing called love remains ephemeral. But the love song can just as easily become a kind of provocation, an unworkable template, a list of ways we can't fit ourselves within a supposedly universal norm.

In 2017, the singer Moses Sumney released his début album, "Aromanticism," a meditation on his inability to engage in romantic attachment. It's not that he is incapable of feeling. It takes listening to only a few seconds of Sumney's singing to become aware of how much and how deeply he feels, and of his skill for cramming as much of himself as possible into every second of his music. A single line delivers a continuum of these feelings, expressed by a strident falsetto, a coy growl, a fey, broken whisper. "Aromanticism" lingers on themes of ambivalence and loneliness—not quite mopey despair so much as a quest for what to do with a surplus of energy.

"I fell in love with the in-between / Coloring in the margins," Sumney recalls on "Neither/Nor," a brisk, rising song on his new album, "græ." He's reminiscing about his youth, singing softly about being a boy, breathing out "smoke with no fire." Since he began playing small clubs in Los Angeles, in the early part of the last decade, the charismatic, fashion-forward Sumney has fit the profile of someone destined for stardom. But there is a mismatch between the fluid, slippery music he makes and the narrow range of identities and poses allowed to black artists. He has spent much of his career exploring his own emotional language rather than writing sing-along anthems, expanding his own world rather than settling comfortably into the one he found himself in.

At times, "Aromanticism" feels sparse and withdrawn; "græ" is more expansive and, consequently, more open to vulnerability. The song "Virile" opens with a string of carefree "ahs" and a shimmering harp, before giving way to a series of cathartic arena-rock drumrolls. Sumney goes high and low in search of a different version of manhood. "You wanna slip right in / Amp up the masculine / You've got the wrong idea, son / Dear son," he sings, stretching that last word out with a teasing, almost nagging falsetto. The song is quickly followed by "Conveyor," as in belt, as in assembly line. It's as if Sumney were trying to lull a chorus of malfunctioning machines into submission. His voice manages to cut through the chaos and the clatter, bringing with it a soothing synth refrain, offering a model of resilience sometimes more captivating than the words themselves.

Philosophers, scientists, and pop fans alike have wondered what in a song triggers emotion. Is it the lyrics? Is a happy song merely any song that makes us happy? Or is there something about its structure that makes us feel a certain way? Nowadays, our biggest pop stars are often our moodiest. What makes Sumney so enigmatic is the way his work calls to mind an observation by the psychologist Carroll Pratt: that "music sounds the way emotions feel." A song conveys the storm and the stress of how it feels to feel, the manic turns of joy and ecstasy, the sudden onset of all emotions at once. Lyrics may anchor us in a scene or a situation of being up or down. But Sumney's music is more about what it means to feel, even if you have no idea how to name the force that is overtaking you.

Sumney, who is in his late twenties, was born in San Bernardino, about sixty miles east of Los Angeles. Both of his parents were Christian pastors from Ghana. Earlier this year, he published an essay in "Fight of the Century: Writers Reflect on 100 Years of Landmark ACLU Cases," in which he discussed his parents' status, during his childhood, as undocumented immigrants—something he wasn't fully aware of at the time. When Sumney was ten, the family briefly returned to Ghana. He ended up back in Southern California for high school, and began singing in the school choir. He attended U.C.L.A., where he pursued creative writing.

He befriended the Los Angeles R. & B. trio King, who invited him to open some shows. Sumney's performances mainly consisted of him

*Sumney's music evokes what it means to feel, even if you have no idea how to name the force that is overtaking you.*

OPPOSITE: SERGE BLOCH

PHOTOGRAPH BY KAYLA REEFER

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singing over ethereal guitar loops. Audiences quickly recognized that there was something special about his voice; he just needed to figure out how to use it. Dave Sitek, best known for his work with the post-punk group TV on the Radio, lent him a four-track recorder. Sumney's first few singles were folky and stripped down. He collaborated with artists like Beck and Solange, and opened for Sufjan Stevens and James Blake, while deciding what to do for himself.

Sumney's early recordings had a withdrawn, almost shy quality, as he tried to make his singing blend in with pretty strums and delicate, lo-fi sound collages. But, as his songs grew more sophisticated, he began exploring the full range of his voice. Sometimes this meant holding back, calling to mind the quiet, frisky moments of Amy Winehouse. Other times, his voice was bold and restless, almost overpowering the track. Sumney can be reminiscent of Björk: you hear a song and imagine that a less interesting singer might have turned it into an easy hit, rather than a performance that is uniquely the artist's own.

"græ"'s resistance to closure is almost literal: although its first half was released online in February, the rest of it, as well as the physical version, isn't coming out until May. Among the forty-odd contributors to "græ," the most prominent is the experimental electronic musician Daniel Lopatin. Lopatin, who also records as Oneohtrix Point Never, is a master at evoking the feeling of the present: a seamless seesaw between anxious dread and ecstatic bliss. He and Sumney are like sparring partners, testing each other's capacity to match quavering falsetto with machine growls, playful rudeness with New Age synths. Sumney seems less forlorn this time, as he invites others to help navigate these swirls of sound.

The seriousness and the self-possession that define Sumney's work make it easy to miss out on moments of humor. His singing sounds epic and timeless, and then you listen closely and hear a reference to the fantasy series "Animorphs," or a question about whether he's merely someone's "Friday dick." On "Two Dogs," a willowy track that will be released in May, he describes a dog that's "whiter than a health-food store." That these songs are often about loneliness lends the quiet invitation to cross lines a kind of awkward mischievousness. "Sometimes I want to kiss my friends," he sings on the lush, tiptoeing "In Bloom." "You don't want that, do ya? / You just want someone to listen to ya / Who ain't tryna screw ya."

In December, Sumney released a video for "Polly," a gorgeous, lilting guitar ballad about a relationship at an impasse. Sumney looks directly at the camera for the song's duration. As the lyrics appear onscreen, he cries and cries. It's both hard to watch and impossible not to. It's also impossible to understand what he is feeling in that moment—which is why all I could do was laugh. His singing is absorbing and sensual, drawing you past the words, which will never suffice anyway, toward something deeper.

"græ" begins with a meditation on the relationship between the words "isolation" and "island." Throughout, there are spoken segments in praise of multiplicity and knowing oneself, and riffs railing against society's penchant for classification. Perhaps this is the fate of knowing yourself too well—you may always be misunderstood. On "Me in 20 Years," Sumney addresses a fortysomething version of himself, wondering what the future holds and whether the "imprint in my bed" remains. On "Gagarin," he sounds like a muffled lounge singer, wishing to "dedicate my life / My life to something bigger / Something bigger than me." For now, Sumney's songs feel like a billowy shelter, "a space inside which you can exist." Sometimes he sounds like a man, other times like a woman, and then you realize that it's not so much the distinction that matters as how one makes a home of one's choosing in that space. Resisting binaries or expectations isn't just about negation. Gray isn't just a halfway point between black and white. It is its own shade, its own color, its own world of possibilities. ♦

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**No Comment Department**

*From CBS New York.*

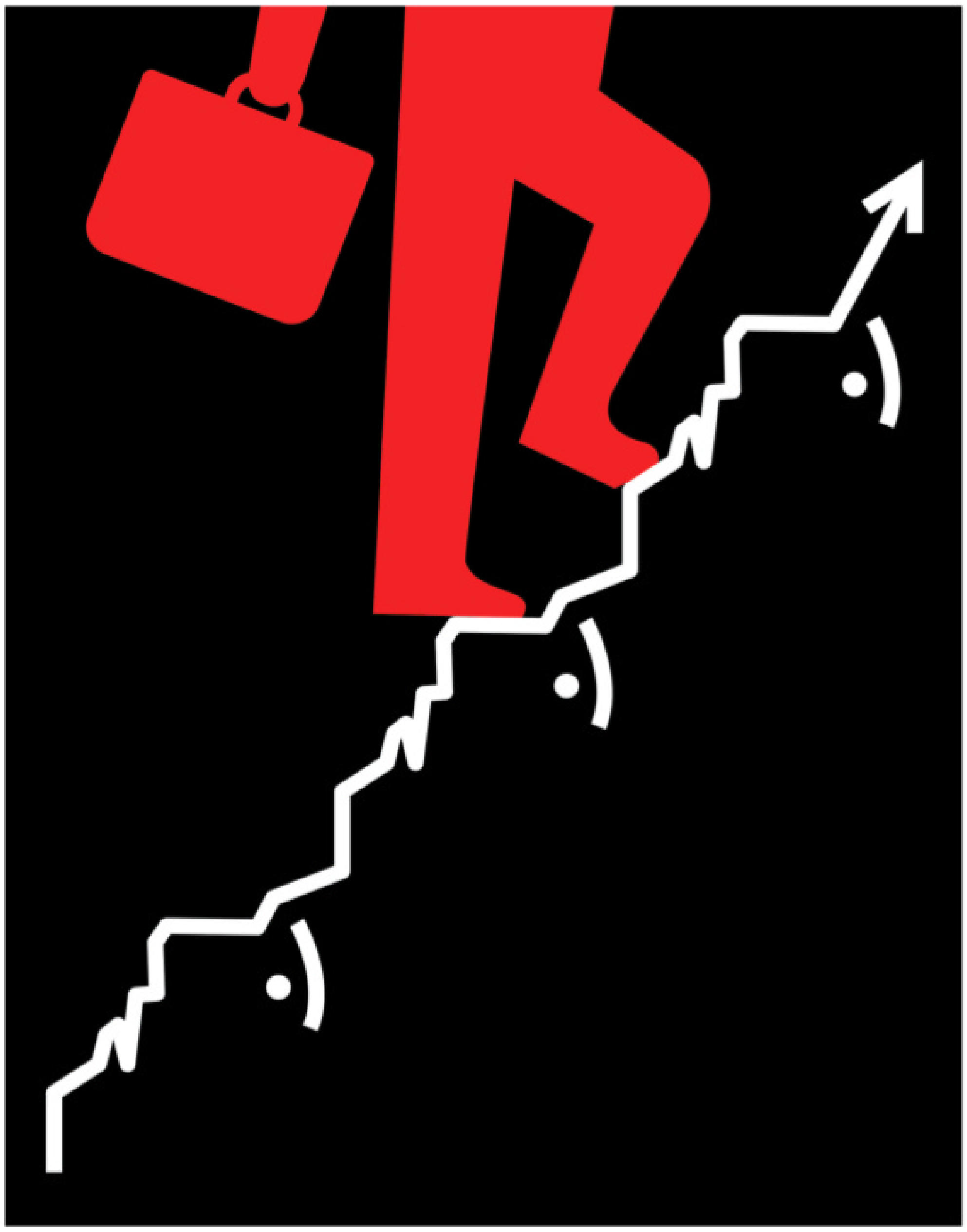
IS THERE A CONNECTION
BETWEEN TWO SEVERED ARMS
FOUND IN NY?

BOOKS

# THE LEVELLER

*Thomas Piketty goes global in "Capital and Ideology."*

BY IDREES KAHLOON



*Inequality, in Piketty's view, drives human history, and calls for radical remedies.*

Speaking in 1918, with Europe ravaged by the horrors of modern warfare and Russia in the hands of the Bolsheviks, Irving Fisher warned his colleagues at the annual meeting of the American Economic Association of "a great peril." That peril, which risked "perverting the democracy for which we have just been fighting," was extreme inequality. "We may be sure that there will be a bitter struggle over the distribution of wealth," Fisher, perhaps the most celebrated economist of his day, maintained. More than a century later—at another annual meeting of the American Economic Association—the spectre once more loomed over the discipline. "American capitalism and democracy are not working for people without a college degree," Anne Case, an economist at Princeton, declared in January, as she flipped through slides in a large, windowless conference room. On a screen, charts showed breathtaking increases in suicide, drug overdoses, and alcoholism among less-educated whites over the past two decades. These "deaths of despair," as she and her husband-collaborator, Angus Deaton, call them, originated in the deep unfairness of American society. When Fisher issued his warning, the richest ten per cent of Americans were taking home forty-one per cent of all domestic income. Today, they take forty-eight per cent.

If inequality has become the subject of intense public attention, a good deal of the credit goes to the French economist Thomas Piketty. In 2014, "Capital in the Twenty-first Century," a dense tome published in English by an academic press, became an unlikely global best-seller; there are more than two million copies in print. Previously, Piketty, who teaches at the Paris School of Economics, had been an academic luminary but not a public one; the focus of his research, inequality, had long been a niche subject. Timing and talent catapulted him to fame. His book perfectly fit the post-Occupy Wall Street ethos, providing empirical rigor for the upswell in anger. The wounds of the Great Recession had hardly scabbed over; disillusionment with the rich and powerful verged on Jacobinism. The moment was ripe for a grand, iconoclastic theory, and that's exactly what Piketty provided, with detailed figures and lucid prose. In earlier work, he and a frequent collaborator, the economist Emmanuel Saez, had the innovative idea of framing inequality in terms of the top one per cent's share versus everyone else's—eschewing the discipline's usual formula of Gini coefficients, which are meaningless to the masses, and identifying a clear, common enemy. The problem was inherent in capitalism itself. Over the past century, the rate of return on capital ($r$) and existing wealth, owned disproportionately by the rich, had exceeded the rate of growth in the economy ($g$) as a whole. That had created a chasm of inequality comparable to what existed during the Gilded Age, before the gilding was removed by two cataclysmic world wars and the Great Depression. You could distill the core of Piketty's theory down to three characters ($r>g$) and emblazon the formula on a T-shirt—something that nerdier subgroups of the population actually did.

Success has launched Piketty into the venerated position of the French global intellectual, like Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Claude Lévi-Strauss before him. *Le Monde* hosts his blog; he was enlisted as an adviser by a 2017 French Presidential campaign (of the Socialist Party candidate Benoît Hamon; he'd previously advised another such candidate, Ségolène Royal). And

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN WISEMAN

now, as if to secure his preëminence in this role, Piketty has published a yet more ambitious book, “Capital and Ideology” (Harvard). It encompasses history, political science, and political theory, and is even more voluminous than its predecessor. This reviewer must report that the eleven-hundred-page work broke an (admittedly unsteady) card table and later caused a carry-on to exceed the weight limit on an (admittedly stingy) European airline.

There’s a reason for the heft. “Capital and Ideology” sets out not only to describe capitalism but also to help us “transcend” it. Piketty both diagnoses and prescribes: he tries to expose the contradictions of the reigning ideology of “hypercapitalism” and its malign consequences (including a populist-nativist backlash), and, to stave off disaster, recommends a breathtaking series of reforms. They include a schedule of taxation on income and wealth that reaches ninety per cent and the elimination of nation-states in favor of “a vast transnational democracy,” which will secure “a universal right to education and a capital endowment, free circulation of people, and de facto virtual abolition of borders.” A serious disease, Piketty believes, calls for strong medicine.

“Capital and Ideology” opens with an arresting pronouncement: “Every human society must justify its inequalities: unless reasons for them are found, the whole political and social edifice stands in danger of collapse.” War, recession, religion—every facet of human existence has its roots in inequality, Piketty tells us. Indeed, he uses “society” and “inequality regime” almost interchangeably. If there are hazards in such a monocausal account, it may be a necessary simplification in the quest to anatomize social organization from the Middle Ages to modernity.

Adopting a theory of the French philologist Georges Dumézil, Piketty writes that early societies were “trifunctional”—in ways largely determined by birth, you were a member of the clergy, the warrior-nobility, or the peasantry. (Something similar, he notes, can be seen in “Planet of the Apes” and “Star Wars.”) During this period of limited mobility, inequality was justified by the notion that the castes were interdependent—like the limbs of the body. If someone gets to be the brains, then someone else has to be the feet. After the development of the central state and later disruptions like the French Revolution, inequality was taken to be a necessary feature of “ownership societies,” premised on individual liberty but also on the “sacralization of private property.”

In the twentieth century, this model fell apart. “The ideology of the self-regulated market in the 19th century led to the destruction of European societies in the period 1914-1945 and ultimately to the death of economic liberalism,” Piketty writes. “We know now that this death was only temporary.” In the postwar era, societies drifted into either social democracy, which Piketty thinks is flawed but closest to his ideal society, or communism, which failed utterly. What ensued was the revenge of the ownership society. The dominant ideology of the modern era, in Piketty’s view, has been one of “neo-proprietarianism,” in which private-property rights are worshipped above all, auguring another disaster.

Spenglerian in scope, Piketty’s critique reaches far back in history and across the globe: he explores the “inequality regimes” in Mughal India, slave colonies in the West Indies, and post-Soviet republics. It’s an admirable corrective to the usual Eurocentrism of Western economists, even if most readers will feel the impulse to skip ahead four hundred pages to the discussion of modern economies. Piketty has modified his thinking since his previous opus. Rather than imply that rising inequality is a problem inherent in capitalism, he now suggests that the levels of inequality we get are the ones we countenance—that they’re entirely a matter of political and ideological choices. His famous formula, $r>g$, has all but disappeared. In his retelling, the so-called Trente Glorieuses, the thirty years of relative equality between 1950 and 1980, were the result not of two world wars—which played “only a minor part in this collapse,” he has determined—but, rather, of political decisions made “to reduce the social influence of private property.”

And the policies we adopt certainly do influence inequality. Steeply progressive income taxes and estate taxes shaped income distributions during those Trente Glorieuses. Consider, for that matter, how corporations and the very rich are indulged by the current taxation regime in the West. Tax-collection agencies are resigned to the fact that the biggest fortunes also tend to be the most mobile. In the U.S., many states compete to provide rich people with advantageous tax rates, in order not to lose them. But whatever revenue is gained by holding on to some fortunes is more than undercut by the diminished rates. Since Congress passed its 2017 package of tax cuts—which Republican sponsors justified on global-competition grounds, and claimed would “pay for itself”—corporate-tax collections have fallen by a third. The U.S. is now running trillion-dollar deficits, during a period of long-lasting economic growth, no major military engagements, and no ramp-up in social spending.

What’s more, when states start taxing mobile assets less, they also usually start taxing immobile assets more—and immobile assets, like homes, are usually the only ones working people have. Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman have argued in a recent book of their own, “The Triumph of Injustice,” that effective tax rates on the rich have declined so much in the U.S. that the tax system is now flat, even regressive. The Congressional Budget Office recently estimated that post-tax inequality will continue to climb, with the country’s top one per cent earning 3.1 per cent more each year while the bottom twenty per cent earns just one per cent more per year.

Meanwhile, Piketty estimates, ten per cent of global financial assets are now stashed in tax havens. Ireland, a favorite haven for American companies, had to start publishing modified national economic statistics because of all the foreign assets it harbors. In theory, international taxation could be harmonized by treaties, in the way countries have come together to ban certain kinds of munitions or pollutants. So far, there hasn't been the will.

This picture is discouraging. If it's also familiar, that is a tribute, in part, to the success of Piketty's previous work. The most interesting findings in the second "Capital" come from his forays into political science. He argues that the "Brahmin left"—the most educated citizens and the greatest beneficiaries of the knowledge economy and the supposed meritocracy—has captured the left-wing parties in Western democracies, distracting those parties from their mission of improving the lives of working people. Conservative parties, meanwhile, are under the sway of the "merchant right." Such polarization makes debate over redistribution impossible, and so the lower classes debate immigration and borders instead.

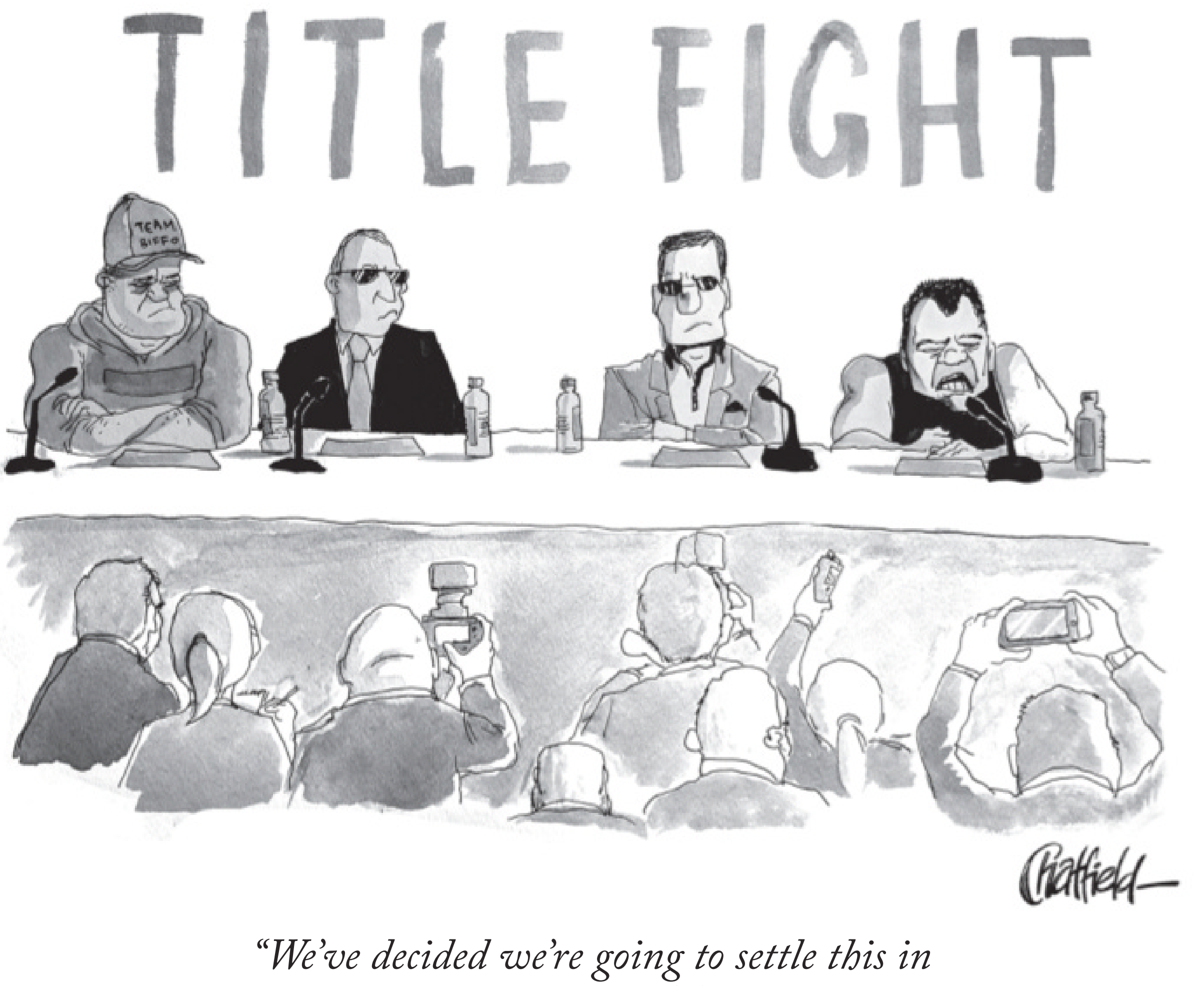
For left-wing parties to win back working people, Piketty says, they will have to reverse this effect. He wants to reignite arguments about inequality in order to dampen nativist furor. Yet this is scarcely a surefire formula. The simple push for more redistribution may worsen a nativist backlash if a lot of voters think they're funding people who aren't "their kind"—minorities. In places like Britain and France, there's anger over welfare benefits to immigrants. In America, the fissures run deeper still. The halcyon postwar days of political comity were shattered by the strife over civil rights, which permanently realigned politics. The Democratic Party continued to advocate for ever-greater redistribution—as with the Great Society programs of Lyndon Johnson or the ensuing affirmative-action policies, among other measures that Piketty praises—only to run into an identitarian backlash among the white working class. In Reagan-era America, this was expressed in the racially coded anxiety over "welfare queens." Later efforts to ramp up the welfare state—such as Barack Obama's ambitious expansion of Medicaid, to the benefit of many poor white Americans—have also become embroiled in the fraught politics of race. Here's where any monocausal account is bound to run into trouble. As political factors, race and redistribution relate in ways too complex to be captured in a formula.

The question of what to do about inequality requires a bit of statistical thinking. Start by imagining an income-distribution chart. In most societies, it is oddly shaped. On the left, there's a hump for the chumps, where the poor and middle class are crammed together, and then a tapering off into an impossibly long, sparsely populated right tail, where the rich lounge. Most indicators of income inequality—such as the share of income captured by the top ten per cent—are measures of the right tail, not the left hump. Piketty's solution is radically simple: just pick a point on the tail and lop off the rest of it. Redistribute. Repeat.

That approach would certainly reduce the commonly cited measures of income and wealth inequality. Under Piketty's preferred system of taxation, it would be exceedingly difficult to maintain fortunes greater than thirty-eight million dollars or so in the United States—that is, greater than a hundred times average private wealth. Jeff Bezos would receive a bill for a hundred and nine billion dollars in Year One.

Many would argue that reshaping the chart of income distribution is a good thing in itself. Still, we might consider how inequality materially harms the typical American. Are the symptoms of this inequality, as we've come to understand them—anti-immigrant sentiment, addiction, suicide—truly worsened when the share of income captured by the top one per cent increases by a few percentage points? Are such symptoms the product of what the rich have or of what the poor don't have: affordable health care, child care, and education; the feeling of job security; a sense of hope for their children's prospects?

These are enormous societal problems, and addressing them would almost certainly require that the United States engage in greater redistribution and intervention. But does it require as much as Piketty suggests? An implicit assumption in his writing is that, when the rich get richer, the poor get poorer. In the absence of economic growth, this zero-sum analysis would be correct. But when growth is positive, the proposition is harder to defend. In China, economic growth has both made the country more unequal and lifted nearly a billion citizens out of extreme poverty. Piketty repeatedly suggests that a more egalitarian society is always a more just one. Yet one can distinguish, as Case and Deaton do, between unfairness and inequality. Imbalances in wealth are



*"We've decided we're going to settle this in the comments of a YouTube video."*

troubling because they lead to imbalances in political power, and so to the creation of predatory monopolies and the like. Piketty, for his part, scarcely addresses the issue of why economic equality is a moral concern; in his scheme, inequality is bad, ultimately, not for what it does but for what it is.

Indeed, for all his willingness to delve into the particularities of pre-Revolutionary French contract law (one learns the distinction between *lods*, *corvées*, and *banalités*) and the celibacy requirements of varying clerical orders, two essential contentions in his book are underdiscussed. The first is that unequal societies do not grow as quickly as egalitarian ones; the second is that they are less stable.

Both assertions are debated among economists and political scientists. Why does Piketty consider them firmly established? During the Trente Glorieuses, he notes, countries in the West had very high marginal tax rates, the lowest levels of inequality observed in human history, and high growth rates. From 1980 to the present day, growth and stability seem to have stalled, at the same time that inequality has skyrocketed. The trends look suggestive—if inequality and growth are reduced, stability should reappear.

But complex social phenomena are rarely so clean-cut. Piketty's own data in the book show that growth was high during the Gilded Age. In the modern era, economic growth and inequality rose in tandem in China and India, as they have in most emerging markets. The Gulf monarchies, which, Piketty demonstrates, are as unequal today as slave colonies were two centuries ago, look remarkably stable by most political metrics. The counterexamples don't necessarily disprove the theory, but a thinker as careful and comprehensive as Piketty should take them on, rather than ignore them.

In "Capital in the Twenty-first Century," Piketty made a policy proposal that, he cautioned, was probably "utopian": a global tax on wealth topping out at around two per cent. Half a dozen years later, it seems almost like milquetoastery. The signature idea of Elizabeth Warren's Presidential candidacy is a wealth tax with a top rate of six per cent, in order to fund her Medicare for All plan; Bernie Sanders's tax plan tops out at eight per cent. As the Overton window shifts, Piketty has made sure to stay well ahead of it. In his new plan, America would raise its taxes high enough to collect fifty per cent of national income each year—roughly ten trillion dollars, or three times as much as the federal government currently takes in. With this cash, the government would not only fund universal health care and higher education but offer everyone a basic income floor equivalent to sixty per cent of average after-tax income. On your twenty-fifth birthday, you'd also get a cash payout of two hundred and thirty-one thousand dollars—the equivalent of sixty per cent of the average adult's net worth. (Piketty has called this system of capital endowment "inheritance for all.") It's enough to make Sanders blush.

Piketty isn't incapable of pragmatism. Many of his suggestions—establishing a fair, progressive tax system; insuring that poor children have access to higher education—could be addressed within the framework of today's "inequality regime," which is to say, contemporary capitalism. The same applies to his call for raising minimum wages, expanding rent control, and giving workers seats on corporate boards—even if these are heterodox recommendations in mainstream economics. And yet theory-of-everything treatises like Piketty's ultimately seek provocation, not practicality, and Piketty concludes that such proposals are not enough to achieve true liberation. "It seems obvious that the only way to transcend capitalism and ownership society is to work out some way of transcending the nation-state," he writes. We'll need "a true participatory and internationalist socialism," he says, in order to free humanity from the contradictions of capitalism in which it is so harmfully enmeshed.

Of course, the people who are most likely to hear—and heed—Piketty's call to action, whether or not they scythe their way through his book, are all of the Brahmin left. Throughout the book, Piketty heaps praise on Sanders, Warren, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the British Labour Party. Corbyn recently campaigned on perhaps the most unabashedly redistributionist manifesto in the Party's history (it called for transferring control of ten per cent of big companies to workers, nationalizing other companies, and instituting a four-day workweek) and then suffered catastrophic losses in working-class Labour strongholds. Perhaps that's because Corbyn simply wasn't bold enough. But if a candidate were to go the full Piketty—by proposing enormous taxes on the rich and taking steps toward surrendering sovereignty to a transnational socialistic union—do we really think that nativism and nationalism would retreat, rather than redouble? Would erstwhile supporters of Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen, Donald Trump, and Geert Wilders evolve beyond their fears of Muslim migration and accept the new utopia?

The challenge for the existing political order in affluent countries is to show that it can effectively address problems like poverty and precarity. In America, poverty is increasingly concentrated and thus more corrosive, while absolute economic mobility looks to be at a low point. So what might reform that falls short of revolution look like? Creating a universal child allowance of three hundred dollars a month may sound like a boring technocratic fix, and, at an annual cost of a hundred billion dollars (or less than half of what's budgeted for Veterans Affairs), it certainly wouldn't require expropriating the fortunes of the top one per cent. Yet it would halve child poverty all on its own. Tripling federal funding for poor schools—which would go a long way to improving mobility and reducing the inheritability of misfortune—would raise costs by a relatively paltry thirty billion a year. Reforming housing assistance so that adults who receive rent subsidies are no longer crammed into ghettos is another measure that's very much within reach, and would substantially improve the lives of their children.

Imagine a congregation of economists a hundred years in the future. Maybe we're on the moon; maybe we're on Mars. Either way, the scene isn't hard to sketch—it will probably still be in a large, windowless room. Inequality at the top end of the income distribution could very well look even more lopsided than it does now. But whether inequality is the topic of the keynote address may depend more on the progress against poverty and middle-class stagnation than on the number of newly minted trillionaires. ♦

BOOKS

# LEGENDS OF HOME

*The career of Aharon Appelfeld.*

BY ADAM KIRSCH

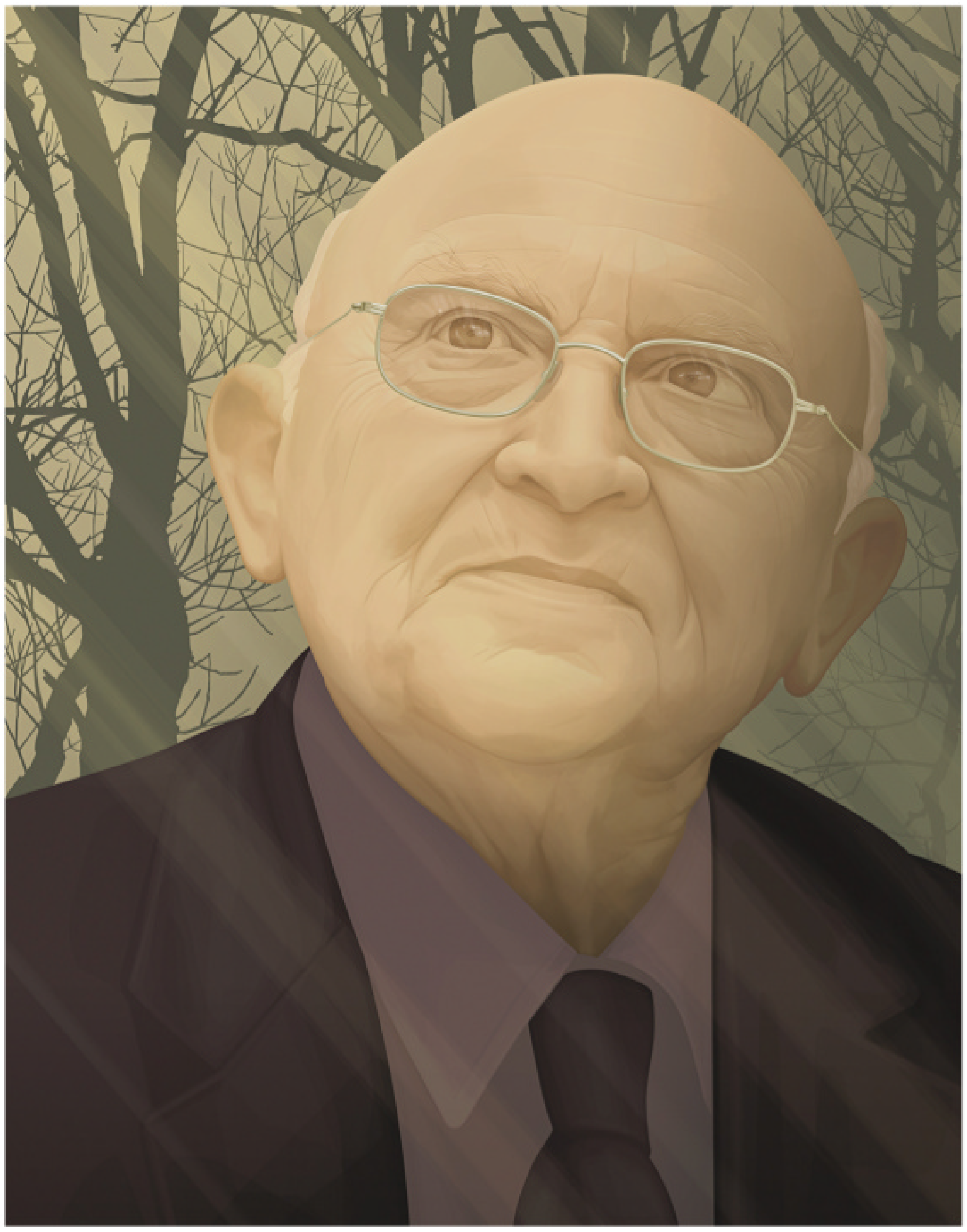


ILLUSTRATION BY JULES JULIEN

In 2018, Israel lost its two greatest novelists, Amos Oz and Aharon Appelfeld. Both were older than the country itself and had witnessed its entire dramatic history, but the ways they dealt with that history could not have been more different. Oz, born in Jerusalem in 1939, threw himself into the development of the young Jewish state: he wrote about the kibbutz where he lived and the psychology of the first Israeli Sabra generation, and assumed an active role in politics as a founder of the Peace Now movement. If you wanted to understand Israeli society in its first half century, Oz's novels would be the natural place to start.

Reading Appelfeld, by contrast, tells you basically nothing about the country in which he lived—at least, not directly. Though he wrote in Hebrew, taught at an Israeli university, and received Israel's highest literary honors, his imagination remained fixed in the land of his early childhood, which was Eastern Europe. Appelfeld wrote more than forty books—including "To the Edge of Sorrow," which appeared in Hebrew in 2012 and is now out in a posthumous English translation by Stuart Schoffman (Schocken)—and almost all of them are set in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. They are often about people like his parents: assimilated, German-speaking, middle-class Jews who live in provincial cities, vacation at country resorts or in spa towns, and worship literature and music instead of the God of their ancestors.

*In an Israeli context, Appelfeld's obsession with Europe's past was almost defiance.*

And so they are all, inevitably, about the Holocaust, which annihilated those Jews and their civilization when Appelfeld was a young boy. He was born in 1932 in a village near Czernowitz—a city that was then in Romania and now belongs to Ukraine—and his childhood came to a terrifying end in 1941, when the fascist Romanian government deported the region's Jews to labor camps. The soldiers who came to Appelfeld's house shot his mother in the yard as he listened, then sent him and his father to a camp, where they were separated. Appelfeld escaped, hid in the forest, and spent the next few years roaming the countryside, either sleeping outdoors or lodging in Ukrainian homes, until he managed to take refuge with the approaching Red Army.

By the time he arrived in Palestine, in 1946, two years before the founding of Israel, Appelfeld had been utterly stripped of his identity. He had lost family, home, and country, as well as years of education and experience. "World War II went on for six straight years, but sometimes it seems to me that it lasted only one long night, from which I awoke a completely different person," he wrote in his 1999 memoir, "The Story of a Life."

The uniquely strange atmosphere of Appelfeld's fiction comes from the fact that, because he could not remember his own past, he was forced to imagine it. "The Story of a Life," in which Appelfeld tries to write about his experiences in a nonfictional register, is a valuable but meagre and fragmentary book. In his novels, conversely, Appelfeld writes with entranced certainty about experiences that could never have been his and worlds that don't quite resemble the real one.

In this way, Appelfeld resembles Kafka, whose influence he discussed in a 1988 interview with Philip Roth: "He spoke to me not only in my mother tongue but also in another language which I knew intimately, the language of the absurd." Absurd, in the philosophical sense of inescapable yet pointless, perfectly describes the journey that the narrator undertakes in Appelfeld's book "The Iron Tracks" (1991). Set in the years after the Second World War, it is the story of Erwin Siegelbaum, a Holocaust survivor who spends his entire life on railroad trips, making an identical circuit of Austria's train stations every year.

"The trains make me free. Without them, what would I be in this world? An insect, a mindless clerk," Siegelbaum muses, evoking Gregor Samsa, who turned into an insect in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." His perpetual journey allows Erwin—which was Appelfeld's first name, before he changed it to the Hebrew Aharon—to remain homeless in the country that is his only home. It is a parable of the Jews' relationship to Europe after the Holocaust, able neither to live in the Old Country nor to leave it behind. "I have no stake here," another Jewish traveller, whom Erwin encounters on a train, says. "I have nothing. Still, it's hard for me to leave that nothing."

For an Israeli novelist like Appelfeld, an imaginative obsession with Europe and the past was a kind of defiance. From the beginning, one of the key principles of Zionism was "negation of the Diaspora": in their homeland, Jews were supposed to turn their backs on centuries of oppression. This idea was all the more urgent for the refugees who arrived in Israel after the Holocaust, and were seen as terrible reminders of the price of Jewish powerlessness. In "The Story of a Life," Appelfeld recalls that, as a new arrival in Palestine, he was indoctrinated with the need to be totally reborn: his future was to require "the extinction of memory, a complete personal transformation and a total identification with this narrow strip of land."

In "Badenheim 1939," published in 1975, and perhaps his best-known book, Appelfeld wrote as lethal an indictment of the self-delusions of prewar European Jewry as any Zionist could want. A hideous idyll, the story takes place in an Austrian spa town, whose Jewish residents spend the last summer before the war listening to chamber music, eating pastries, and engaging in intrigues, while the government's Sanitation Department issues ever more ominous proclamations about their impending deportation "to Poland." On the book's last page, the town's inhabitants gather at the train station, and one of them remarks, "If the coaches are so dirty it must mean that we have not far to go." The line is devastating because of the gap between what the Jews of 1939 knew and what the reader after 1945 knows—a gap that can never be closed, no matter how many times Appelfeld writes about it.

In Hebrew, the term for moving to Israel is *aliya*, which literally means "ascent," while leaving the country is *yerida*, "descent"—concepts that carry an unmistakable moral valence. (In Amos Oz's first novel, "Elsewhere, Perhaps," from 1966, the Dostoyevskian villain tries to seduce a kibbutz girl into leaving Israel and going back to Europe—the ultimate betrayal.) Those directional terms are central to the parable that Appelfeld constructs in "To the Edge of Sorrow"—the story of a group of Jews who go up a mountain in order to found a new kind of society, only to have to come back down in the end, partly victorious and partly defeated.

Many of Appelfeld's novels are concerned with such miniature societies. "Badenheim 1939" has its spa town, and "The Iron Tracks" its cast of itinerants; "The Retreat," from 1982, is about an old-age home of sorts in twentieth-century Austria where a group of Jews go to unlearn their bad (i.e., identifiably Jewish) habits. Such settings serve Appelfeld as a fictional petri dish where certain human potentialities can be developed to an extreme, while excusing the novelist from the sometimes dreary obligations of social realism.

In "To the Edge of Sorrow," the society in question is a band of Jewish partisans during the Second World War. Numbering fewer than fifty, they hide in the Ukrainian countryside, raiding farms for supplies and hoping to hold out until the arrival of the Red Army. This sounds like the premise of a wartime adventure story, but, although we do hear about shoot-outs and sabotage missions, Appelfeld's narrative style is inherently unsuspenseful. His novels are not about waiting for what will happen next but about immersion in a timeless present, a bubble world that is all the more enthralling because you know it is about to pop. This attitude toward time is surely a reflection of Appelfeld's own experience of the abrupt end of childhood, and maybe also of his period in the forests, which was so different from the life he had known that it hardly seemed to be happening in the real world.

The same is true of the collective life of the partisan band, whose experiences are narrated by one of its members, the seventeen-year-old Edmund. The leader is Kamil, a tough fighter who trains the young recruits and leads them on missions to blow up the Germans' railroad tracks. But we soon learn that Kamil is also a spiritual seeker, whose goal is not just the preservation of Jewish lives but the renewal of Jewish life: "Our war is not merely to stay alive. If we do not come out of these forests as complete Jews, we will not have learned a thing."

When Kamil leads the partisans to the summit of the mountain, he is not just securing a safe hideout for the coming winter. He is also Moses on Sinai, hoping to receive a new law that will make a broken people whole. He insists on setting aside time for studying religious books that the partisans have rescued from abandoned Jewish houses, even though his own acquaintance with Jewish texts is poignantly limited to the works of Martin Buber, a modern popularizer.

But most of the partisans, like most Jews in Appelfeld's fiction, are secular people with no real connection to Judaism, and they see Kamil's preaching as embarrassingly retrograde. Karl, the symbolically named communist, even relates how he used to go around bullying rabbis and making them promise to stop teaching Judaism. Only Grandma Tsirl, a very old woman, still possesses some of the simple faith of their ancestors. "Sometimes Grandma Tsirl seems like a priestess whose tribe has been lost and who tries to pass on to the remaining few, to the embers

PREVIOUS PAGE: SOURCE: ROLF VENNENBERND / DPA / ALAMY

who have been plucked from the fire, beliefs that are beyond their understanding," Appelfeld writes.

In this way, the partisans' mountaintop, which was already a kind of Sinai, also becomes a version of the Alpine sanatorium where Hans Castorp undergoes his spiritual education, in Thomas Mann's "The Magic Mountain." Like Mann, Appelfeld surveys all the great quandaries of the twentieth century, only in their Jewish versions. Can modern people genuinely return to a pre-modern way of belief? ("How does one pray without believing the words of the prayer?" Appelfeld writes.) Is communism the heir of Judaism's faith in a messianic future, or a perversion of that faith? Why did the Nazis, even after Germany began to lose the war, continue to prioritize killing Jews above urgent military aims? And how can Jews continue to raise children in a world where such hatred is possible?

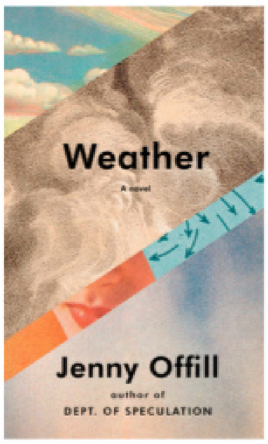
By the end of the novel, none of these questions have been answered, because they can't be. After further trials, the surviving partisans make their descent from the mountain back into real life, where they must face the continuing hostility of their neighbors and the challenge of starting their lives over. For Appelfeld and many other survivors after 1945, the only possible next step was to go to Israel, where they would be asked to forget the past in order to build the future.

"To the Edge of Sorrow" ends on a more ambiguous note. On the novel's last page, a camp survivor asks one of the partisans where they should all go:

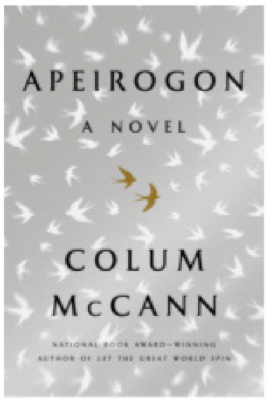
> "Home," he answers right away.
> "Which home?" asks the survivor.
> "There's only one home we grew up in and loved, and we're returning to it."

But what is that home, which Appelfeld deliberately refuses to name? Is it Eastern Europe, whose Jews were almost all murdered? Is it Israel, which Zionism sees as the Jews' historic home and to which it calls them to return? Or perhaps, for Appelfeld, the only possible home was like that mountaintop—a half-remembered, half-imagined place that could exist only in the pages of a book. ♦

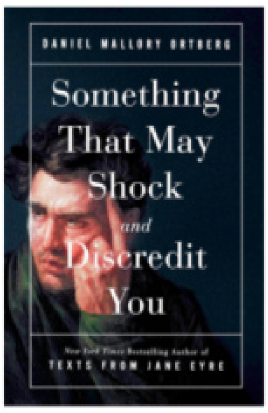
# BRIEFLY NOTED



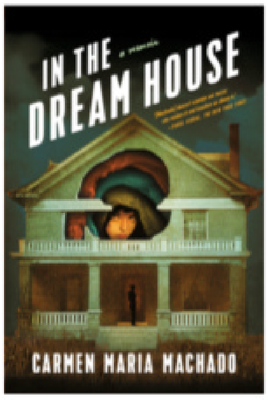
**Weather**, *by Jenny Offill (Knopf).* Lizzie, the narrator of this novel, is hired to answer e-mails for a prominent professor who lectures widely about the imminence of climate apocalypse. As she fields questions from evangelicals, environmentalists, preppers—"everyone who writes her is either crazy or depressed"—she finds her life mired in dread. In diaristic fragments, Lizzie builds a taxonomy of end-times experts: disaster psychologists, futurists, climate scientists, survival instructors, war journalists, hippies. Offill's mordant humor keeps the story nimble even as the novel reveals its central inquiry: How do we make our way to safety, and whom do we bring with us?


APEIROGON
A NOVEL
COLUM
McCANN
NATIONAL BOOK AWARD–WINNING
AUTHOR OF LET THE GREAT WORLD SPIN

**Apeirogon**, *by Colum McCann (Random House).* This multifaceted novel, whose title means "a shape with a countably infinite number of sides," tells the story of an unlikely friendship amid the Israel-Palestine conflict. Bassam Aramin, a Palestinian who served a prison sentence for throwing a grenade, and Rami Elhanan, a former Israeli soldier, each lost a child to the violence. Drawn together by grief, they now work to educate people about the conflict's human cost. Blending fiction and nonfiction in more than a thousand mini-chapters, McCann's account includes tales about the history, people, and weapons involved in the occupation of Palestine as well as interviews with Rami and Bassam. The ambitious form sometimes elides the nuances of Rami's and Bassam's stories, but McCann's generous narrative amplifies their emotionally resonant message.



**Something That May Shock and Discredit You**, *by Daniel Mallory Ortberg (Atria).* The author of this collection of essays and humorous interludes illuminates the story of his gender transition by assembling an unlikely group of interlocutors, including William Shatner, Ovid, the Golden Girls, and John Bunyan. Ortberg does not simply narrate his experience of transition; he also grapples with the challenge of doing so, toggling skillfully between criticism, personal essay, and literary pastiche, and at one point satirizing the "po-faced transmasculine memoir I am trying not to write." Animated by Ortberg's Christian faith and eclectic cultural enthusiasms, the book is a syllabus of sorts—a road map for navigating one remarkable writer's mind.



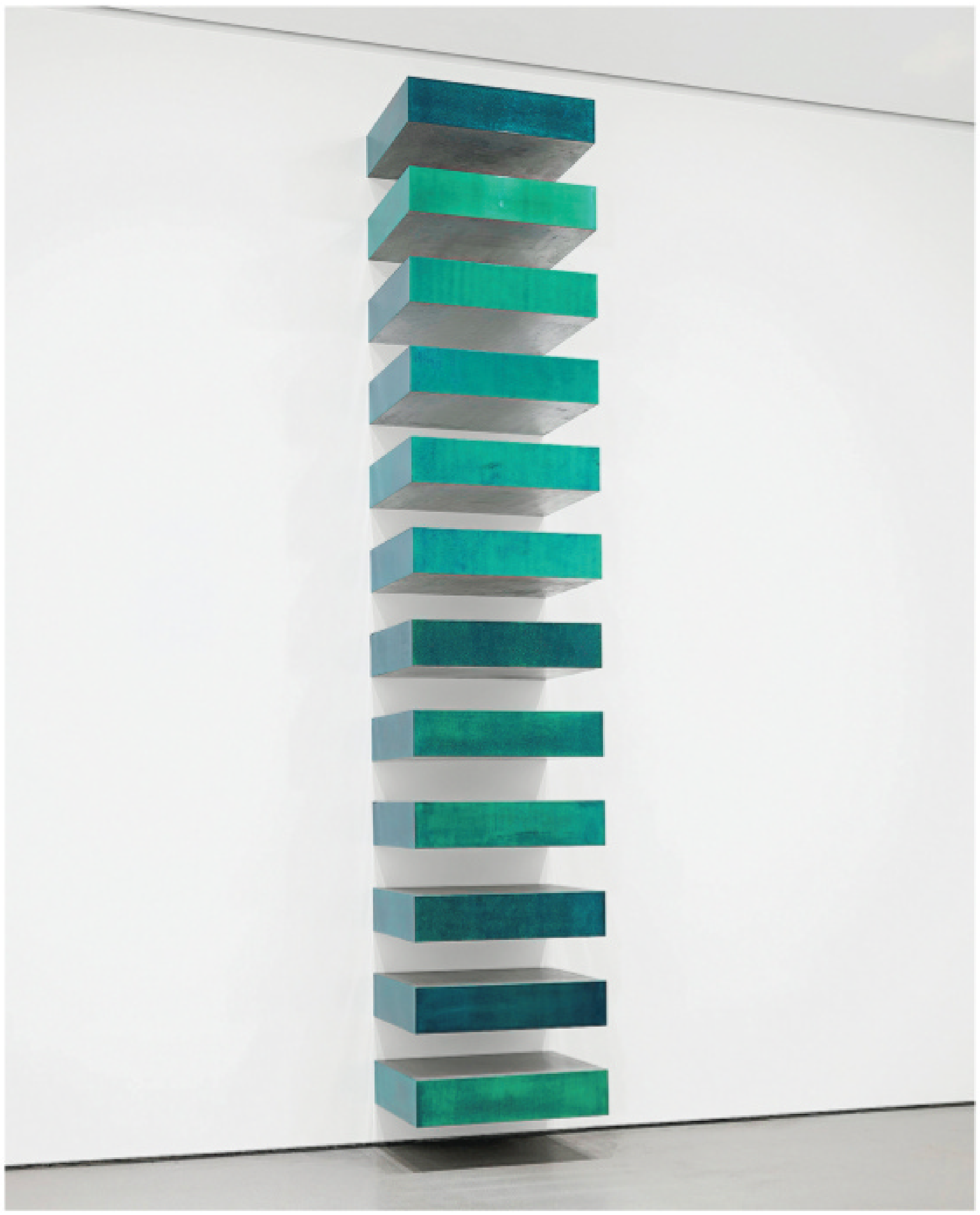
**In the Dream House**, *by Carmen Maria Machado (Graywolf).* The titular house in this memoir is where the author and her girlfriend live in passionate bliss, until the girlfriend turns manipulative, cruel, and sometimes violent. Then it becomes a "dungeon of memory" and the unifying metaphor of an account that emerges in shards of autobiography, history, and fable. Searching for other stories like hers, she finds few, and reflects on the "archival silence" surrounding queer domestic abuse. The memoirist's task, she writes, is to "braid the clays of memory and essay and fact and perception together, smash them into a ball, roll them flat."

THE ART WORLD

# THE SHAPE OF THINGS

*Donald Judd in retrospect.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



*"Untitled," from 1967. Judd's objects expose and flavor the space they inhabit.*

COURTESY MOMA © 2020 JUDD FOUNDATION / ARS, NEW YORK

I would tell you my emotional responses to the gorgeous works in the Donald Judd retrospective that has opened at the Museum of Modern Art if I had any. I was benumbed, as usual, by this last great revolutionary of modern art. The boxy objects (he refused to call them sculptures) that Judd constructed between the early nineteen-sixties and his death, from cancer, in 1994, irreversibly altered the character of Western aesthetic experience. They displaced traditional contemplation with newfangled confrontation. That's the key trope of Minimalism, a term that Judd despised but one that will tag him until the end of time. In truth, allowing himself certain complexities of structure and color, he was never as radically minimalist as his younger peers Dan Flavin (fluorescent tubes) and Carl Andre (units of raw materials). But Judd, a tremendous art critic and theorist, had foreseen the change (imagine, in theatre, breaking the fourth wall permanently) well before his first show of mature work, in 1963, when he was thirty-five. Slowly, by erosive drip through the nineteen-sixties and seventies, the idea that an exhibition space is integral to the art works that it contains took hold. It is second nature for us now—so familiar that encountering Judd's works at MOMA may induce déjà vu.

We are talking about, for example, an untitled piece from 1964: a wall-mounted, square-sectioned, polished brass tube, seven feet long, from which descend five vertical tubes in iron, lacquered blue. Of the same vintage, there's a rectangular box, almost four feet long, with a top and sides of translucent orange Plexiglas and ends of hot-rolled steel. The works register as material propositions of certain principles—chiefly, openness and clarity. They aren't about anything. They afford no traction for analysis while making you more or less conscious of your physical relation to them, and to the space that you and they share. As installed by the curator Ann Temkin, with perfectly paced samples of Judd's major motifs—among them, floor-to-ceiling "stacks" of shelflike units, mostly of metal-framed, tinted Plexiglas, which expose and flavor the space they occupy—the second of the show's four big rooms amounts to a Monument Valley of the minimalist sublime. Don't miss it. Less enchanting, though expertly appointed, are a room of tentative early work and two that feature such later developments as boothlike, angled constructions, at joins of wall and floor, in raw plywood; large aluminum boxes containing differently oriented, lushly colored sheets of Plexiglas; and a huge congeries, nearly six feet high by more than twenty-four feet long, of stacked, bolted, and multicolored horizontal aluminum open boxes.

Not represented are Judd's curatorial adventures, which included an exquisitely revamped building at 101 Spring Street, where he lived for a time and experimented with ways of installing art. It has been preserved as a museum. Then came the artist's Bayreuth, his Mecca, in the remote (from anywhere!) desert town of Marfa, West Texas. There, starting in 1971, he converted old military, civic, commercial, and domestic buildings to house permanent and temporary installations of his work, that of artists he favored, and his collections of Navajo blankets and other choice craft objects. He also created studios, guest quarters, and his own living space, tucked into one end of a former gymnasium.

Works by Judd are almost routinely beautiful, but coldly and even imperiously so, as if their quality were none of your business. If you have any feeling, it might be chagrin at being underqualified to cope with so rigorous a visual intelligence. He's Donald Judd; you're not. He came on as a Savonarola of art in early writings and interviews, preaching a chastened aesthetic that should be "non-naturalistic, non-imagistic, non-expressionist," in addition to "unrelational," "nonillusionistic," and "neither painting nor sculpture." That dispenses with an awful lot of what normally appeals to people about art, leaving, in my case, a state of chilled awe. The one solid pleasure still provided is that of decoration: art that is meant not to be looked at but to be seen in relation to the environments that it enhances—keeping in mind that Judd's ideal environments are voids. (Come to that, we owe to Minimalism the stubborn fashion in architecture and design of hygienically spare, white-walled interiors and sleekly simplified commodities.) Success did not mellow him. Nor was he much given to humor. His statement of purpose, in 1986, for the Chinati Foundation, which he instituted for Marfa, admits no doubt about the grandeur, and the grandiosity, of his enterprise: "Somewhere, just as the platinum-iridium meter guarantees the tape measure, a strict measure must exist for the art of this time and place." Visiting those places, you're not an art lover. You're a pilgrim.

Judd was born in 1928 in Excelsior Springs, Missouri, the son of a Western Union executive. In 1948, after Army service, he began studies that led to a degree in philosophy and—but for a thesis—one in art history, from Columbia University. His early work evolved from so-so abstract painting to such tentative three-dimensional experiments as the relief of a yellow, concave, plastic letter from a sign embedded in a Masonite panel painted cadmium red light (a favorite Judd hue). Manually, he was a klutz. Nothing quite fits in his initial constructions, and his drawing style is rudimentary. His first really strong works—woodblocks, from 1961, of tine-like vertical stripes contained by a diagonal shape—were executed by his father, Roy (who co-signed the backs). Starting in 1964, almost everything Judd made was commercially fabricated. He was a thinker and a designer of far-seeing intellect and, if you will, profound taste. Indeed, his main holdover from modernism was a high seriousness in matters of discrimination, asserting preferences as gauges of integrity that expand beyond the aesthetic to the moral. You can't know now from looking only at his work that his politics were left-libertarian, but he seemed sure that sophisticated viewers would implicitly understand his stance. The populism of Andy Warhol repelled him, but he found Roy Lichtenstein's formal prowess "hugely satisfying."

Judd's extraordinary connoisseurship shines in the reviews he wrote—some six hundred of them—between 1959 and 1965, most for *Arts Magazine*. Gathered in a cherishable book, "Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959-1975," they combine lucid description and fearless judgment in a bracingly forthright, no-nonsense style that makes other critics of the time, and most of us since then, seem flabby by comparison. Almost always, when an artist is familiar to me Judd's assessment is penetrating and dead-on correct, while never gentle. (Imagine being Charles Cajori, a fair-to-middling second-generation Abstract Expressionist, and reading a review of your work that begins "The color is gray, varied some, and a little grayed blue and orange. It could not be less considered.") Judd's later writing, from the seventies to the nineties, runs to jeremiads against the thick-headedness and what he deemed the incompetence of art-world institutions. He regularly had good reason to complain of damage to his works returned from museum shows. Minimalist art was long vulnerable to art handlers and viewers who barely saw it as art, and to children who mistook it for playground equipment. Absolute physical perfection, destructible by a nick or a fingerprint, is as essential to Judd's aesthetic as it was, before him, to Brancusi's, and, more recently, to that of Jeff Koons.

A wonderment of the MOMA show is that it is installed with no physical, or even indicated, barriers. Temkin, fingers crossed, acknowledged to me that the presence of the works would be compromised otherwise. It's worth pausing to note that probably only MOMA commands the clout, the cash, and the expertise to gather, from many collections, the number and quality of so many fragile treasures. The chance surely won't recur to take the measure—platinum-iridium grade or not—of an artist whose influence on our art and, sub rosa, our lives in common, remains beyond large, engulfing. ♦

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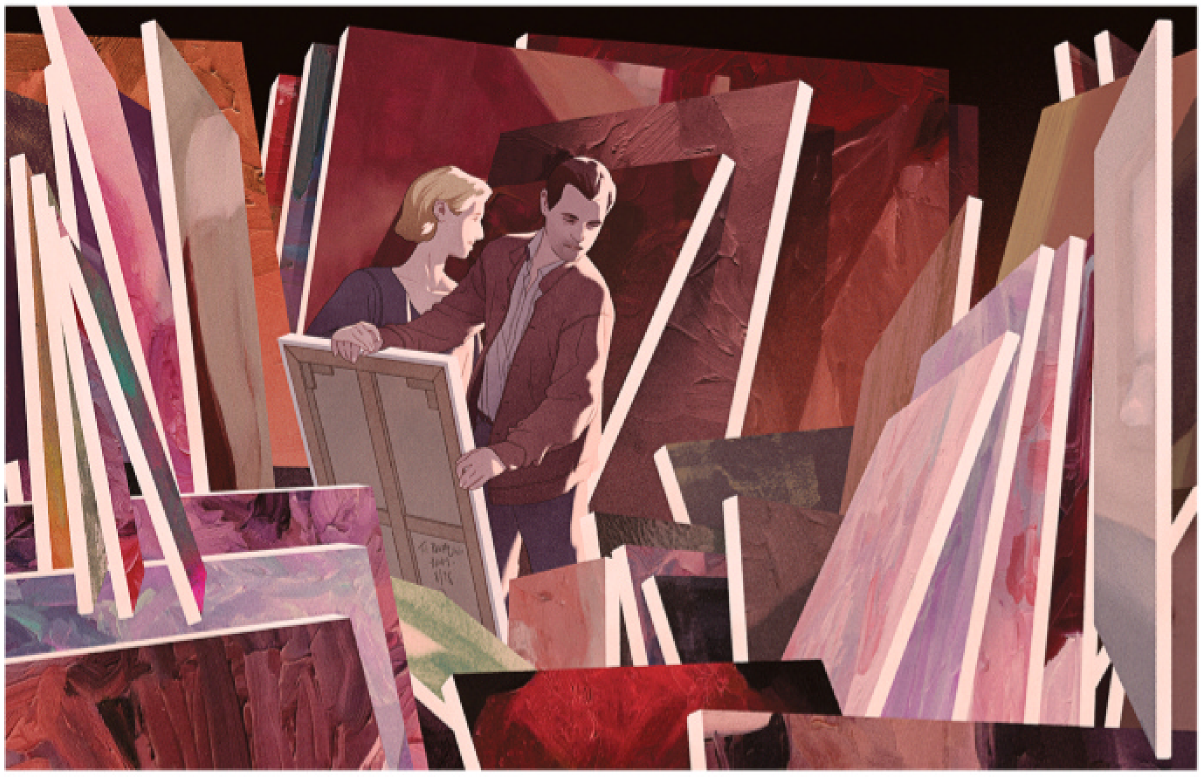
THE CURRENT CINEMA

# LYING TOGETHER

*"The Burnt Orange Heresy" and "The Whistlers."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

Career options are in constant flux. Ambitious students who might once have embarked upon an arduous training in neurosurgery can now stream the sound of panpipes, invest in a clutch of jade eggs, and swiftly prosper as wellness consultants. No profession has risen quite so fast, however, as that of intimacy coördinator. It's a hell of a job. You hang around on movie sets, telling people in various states of undress what they can do to one another, what they mustn't even think of when they're doing it, what they definitely *can't* do, and, once they've not done it, how to treat the nasty case of tennis elbow that they developed along the way.



*Elizabeth Debicki and Claes Bang star in Giuseppe Capotondi's film.*

Yet the hardiest intimacy coördinator—armed with a tape measure, a protractor, a magnifying glass, and a copy of Peter Singer's "Practical Ethics"—would struggle, I suspect, with "The Burnt Orange Heresy" and "The Whistlers." These two new films have a surprising amount in common. In each case, near the start, a man and a woman have sex. The activity itself is vanilla but vigorous, like a frothing milkshake. But what of the motivations?

In "The Burnt Orange Heresy," the spent participants, who only just met, lounge around, in ecstasy's wake, and riff about what comes next. "We'll move to the States. Connecticut, probably. Buy a house, porch, with a swing and a brook," one says. "Babbling," the other adds. You can sense that the riffing turns them on, and that they're almost certainly lying about what brought them to this encounter. As for "The Whistlers," the couple isn't a couple. He's a cop and she's a criminal, but they're in league, and she pretends to be a sex worker, summoned to his apartment, because they're all too aware of being watched on CCTV by those who wish them ill. In short, what appears to be consensual intimacy, in both movies, is an act of deliberate carnal deceit. Coördinate *that*.

"The Burnt Orange Heresy," directed by Giuseppe Capotondi, stars Claes Bang (I'm saying nothing) as an art critic named James Figueras. Though handsomely clean-cut, he's ragged around the edges in ways that are hard to define; you'd willingly lend him money, but you wouldn't expect to get it back. We first meet him in Milan, where he's lecturing to a group of culture buffs—spinning them a yarn about a nonexistent painter and then smoothly reeling them in. They are joined by a latecomer, the elegant Berenice Hollis (Elizabeth Debicki), of no fixed abode. She and Figueras, wasting no time, become firm friends, as detailed above, and he asks her along on his next jaunt: an invitation from a wealthy art collector, Joseph Cassidy, to his villa on Lake Como. Tough gig.

Cassidy is played by none other than Mick Jagger, who has graced our feature films all too rarely since he played the reclusive rock star of "Performance" (1970), delivering "Memo from Turner" in a crowing drawl, among half-naked gangsters, with Ry Cooder on slide guitar. If Jagger's character hadn't been shot at the end of that movie, you could imagine him growing up into the comically rich Maecenas of "The Burnt Orange Heresy"—though not, as yet, growing old. Cassidy is an extraordinary figure: wicked, wrinkled, flute-thin, flawlessly dressed, with a head too big for his frame and a smile too big for his head. The smile suggests a perpetual amusement, as if he were enjoying a joke that is far too private to share.

Identifying Figueras as a fellow-knave, Cassidy gives him a delicate sin to commit. The target is Jerome Debney (Donald Sutherland), the Salinger of painters—an object of both reverence and rumor, long vanished from the public eye. In fact, he's dwelling quietly in the grounds of the villa, and Figueras's mission, should he choose to accept it, is to steal a Debney, having inveigled himself into the artist's confidence. What (or, indeed, whether) he has been creating of late is not the point. Cassidy, like all patrons, craves to possess.

"The Burnt Orange Heresy" began as a 1971 novel by Charles Willeford: cavalryman, tank commander, poet, boxer, crime writer, and college professor. No bio-pic could contain so thronged a life. "Miami Blues," published in 1984, four years before his death, was adapted into a sharp-witted thriller, with Alec Baldwin and Jennifer Jason Leigh, and I was praying for a repeat with "The Burnt Orange Heresy." Everything's in place, and there's not a weak link in the cast,

ILLUSTRATION BY LEONARDO SANTAMARIA

with Debicki—lofty, playful, and unreadable—in especially beguiling form. The idea that art, like love, is something that you can make or fake, and that surprisingly few people can tell the difference, will always be ripe for exploration. And yet the movie stumbles. The book was set in Florida, and the prettifying switch to Italy adds languor but subtracts fever; even when the plot speeds up, in the final third, the atmosphere feels more hasty than intense, and the alluring promise of the early scenes, when you couldn't tell if the hero was fooling the heroine, or vice versa, melts away. They should have stayed in bed.

It's been a while since whistling had a major role in a movie. Admirers of Hitchcock's "The 39 Steps" (1935) will remember the earworm stuck in Robert Donat's brain—the musical phrase that he couldn't help whistling, and that returned to him, laden with fresh meaning, at the finale. Then there's the emotional pick-me-up of "I Whistle a Happy Tune," as sung by Deborah Kerr (or, rather, by Marni Nixon, the queen of dubbing), in "The King and I" (1956). Now we have Corneliu Porumboiu's "The Whistlers," the plot of which demands that the characters put their lips together and blow.

Much of the tale is set in La Gomera, one of the Canary Islands. La Gomera is the ancient home of El Silbo, the nonverbal idiom by which its inhabitants have traditionally made contact across the island's gullies and ravines. The component sounds of Spanish words, cut down to two vowels and four consonants, are conveyed by whistling, the trick being to curl your fingers against your mouth with one finger outstretched, as if your hand were a gun. That is how Cristi (Vlad Ivanov), a Romanian visitor to La Gomera, is taught the rudiments of Silbo by an expert, who explains, "If the police hear the language, they will think the birds are singing." Pastoral noir! The fact that Cristi *is* the police only proves what a heap of trouble he's in. Still, he's an ideal student of Silbo, being not just a quick learner but a taciturn sort, more likely to clam up than to spill. The less talking you do, in his line of work, the better.

But what is that line? There's no risk of my revealing what happens in Porumboiu's film, because I remain, as I began, in the dark. All I can tell you is that Cristi's a bent cop, based in Bucharest, and trying to operate on both sides of the fence. He has a scary superior, Magda (Rodica Lazar), who is battling corruption, although she, too, is prepared to flex the rules. That may be why her office is bugged. The official villains include a money-laundering gangster, Zsolt (Sabin Tambrea), and his girlfriend, Gilda (Catrinel Marlon), the woman who sleeps with Cristi in the interests of untruth. He warms to her, and, at one point, they communicate from afar in Silbo, as though it were a natural language of love. If Cristi were a Rita Hayworth fan, he would recall one of the first principles of cinema: Never, ever fall for anyone named Gilda.

There are nods to other films. We get a scene at the Bucharest Cinemathèque, for example, where "The Searchers" is showing, plus a creepy motel clerk who may be the long-lost Romanian cousin of Norman Bates. As for the housefronts and vacant squares amid which a shoot-out takes place, they are actually the relics of an abandoned movie set. At moments like this, "The Whistlers" seems to be suspended within quotation marks—withdrawing, as it were, to a discreet distance from the demonstrably real. Some viewers will delight in such cleverness, but is it really the director's strongest suit?

More rewarding, I think, is the backward glance to his own creative past: specifically, to "Police, Adjective" (2009), in which we first met Cristi—or a younger instar of him, at any rate, played by a different actor. Though already a cop, he was as yet unbent, and thus reluctant to punish some poor teen-ager with a drug charge that would mean a life-wrecking prison term. Porumboiu, like many of his contemporaries, was probing the bureaucracy of post-Communist Romania and finding it to be not only infuriating but morally and spiritually anesthetic.

The new film is definitely suaver and busier, glinting with wit and concluding in, of all cities, Singapore. Yet there's still a numbness in the middle-aged Cristi, as though the free play of his conscience had seized up in the service of the state. When he visits his aging mother, she strokes him, says what a good boy he used to be, and asks, "How did you end up like this?" Looking at Cristi's face, expressively blank, you wonder if he chose to go wrong or if he was simply defeated and deadened in his efforts to do the right thing. He could whistle a happy tune, even now, but I doubt if it would help. ♦

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**NEWYORKER.COM**
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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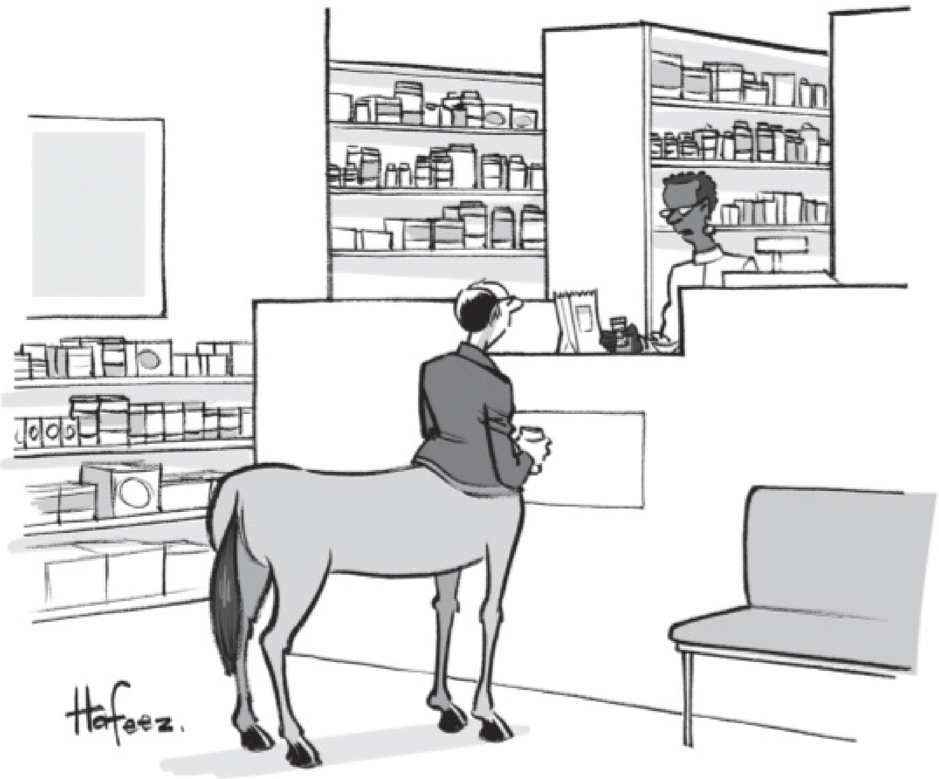
# CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Kaamran Hafeez, must be received by Sunday, March 8th. The finalists in the February 17th & 24th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 23rd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.*

## THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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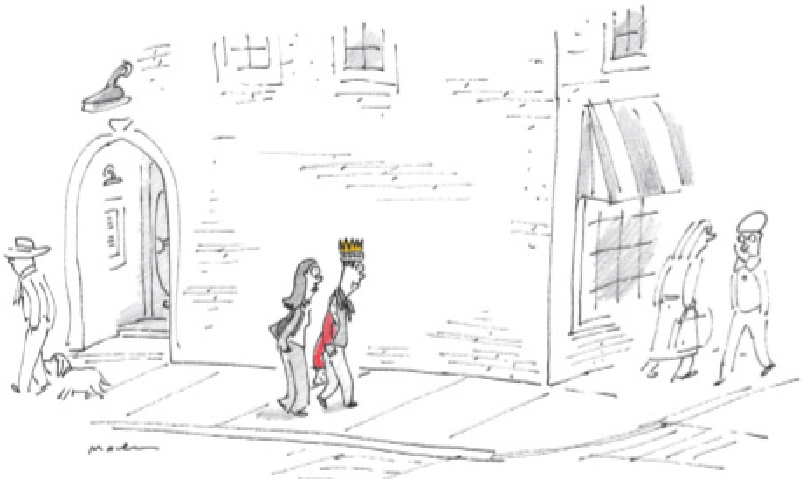
## THE FINALISTS

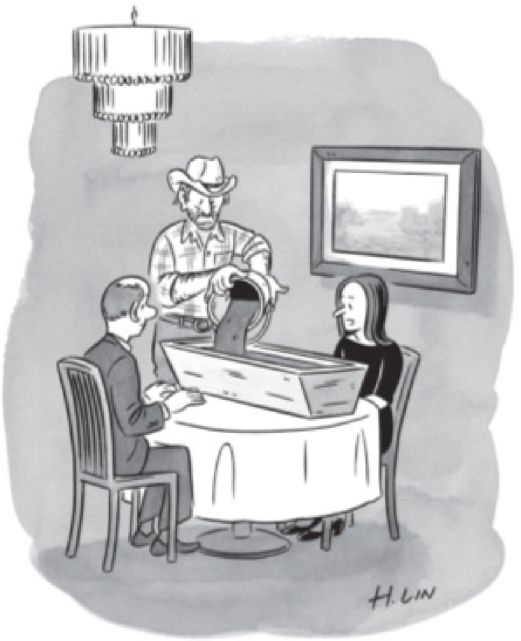


*“So this is your idea of treating me like a queen?”*
Elaine Genovese, North Salem, N.Y.

*“They weren't usurpers, dear. They just had a reservation.”*
Ben Gamboa, Whittier, Calif.

*“Harry, the whole point of leaving England was to blend in.”*
Deb Pecchia, Hyde Park, N.Y.

## THE WINNING CAPTION



*“If there's a ring in here, Hank, I swear to God . . .”*
Brittany Vance, Idaho Falls, Idaho

Mrs. Doubtfire

IS HERE TO PUT A SPRING IN YOUR STEP, A SONG IN YOUR HEART, & A LAUGH IN YOUR BELLY.

On Broadway, Poppets

Music and Lyrics by Wayne Kirkpatrick and Karey Kirkpatrick Book by Karey Kirkpatrick and John O'Farrell

Directed by Jerry Zaks

Based upon the Twentieth Century Fox Motion Picture

Proud Partner of Mrs. Doubtfire

Broadway previews begin March 9th | MrsDoubtfireMusical.com